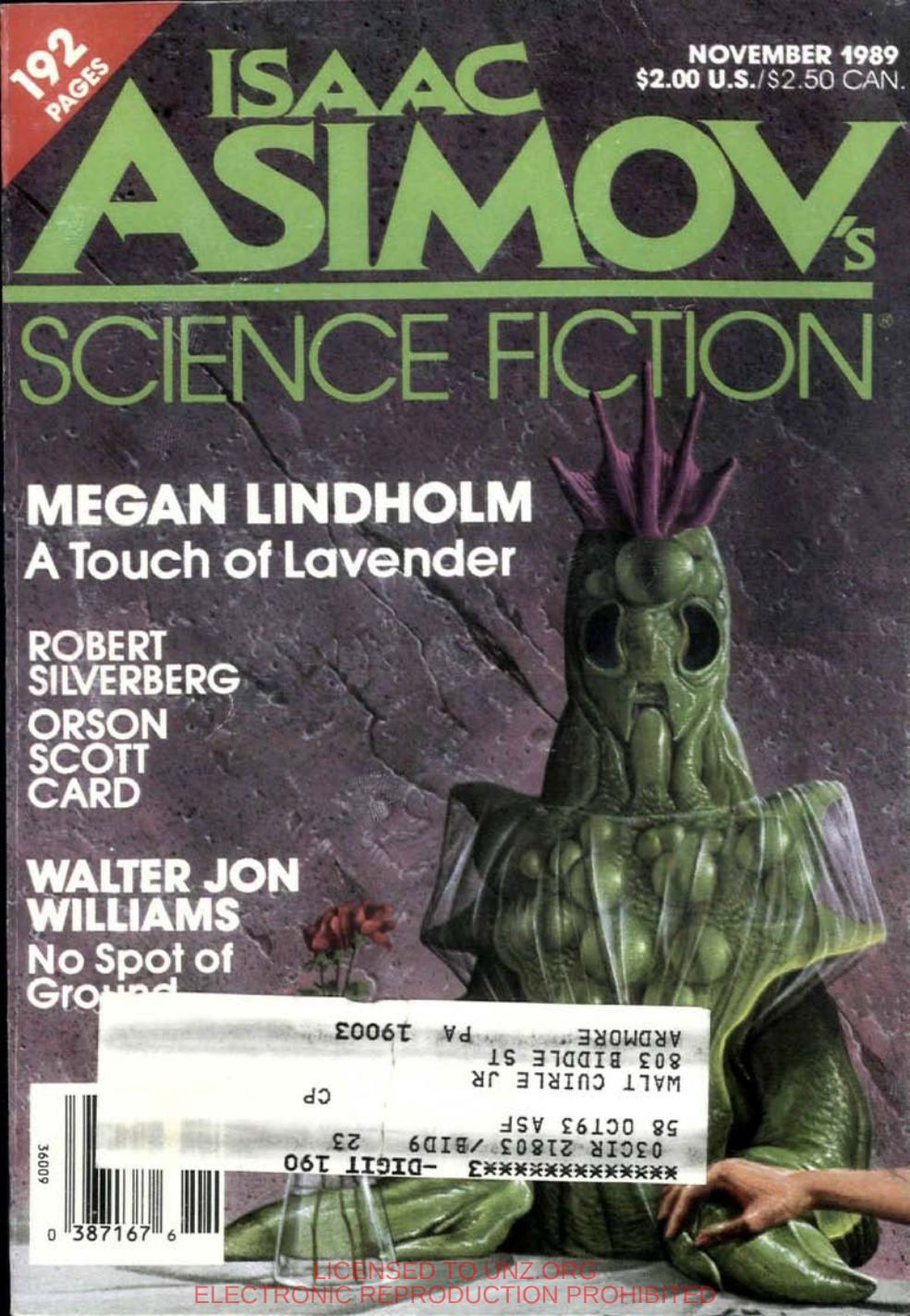

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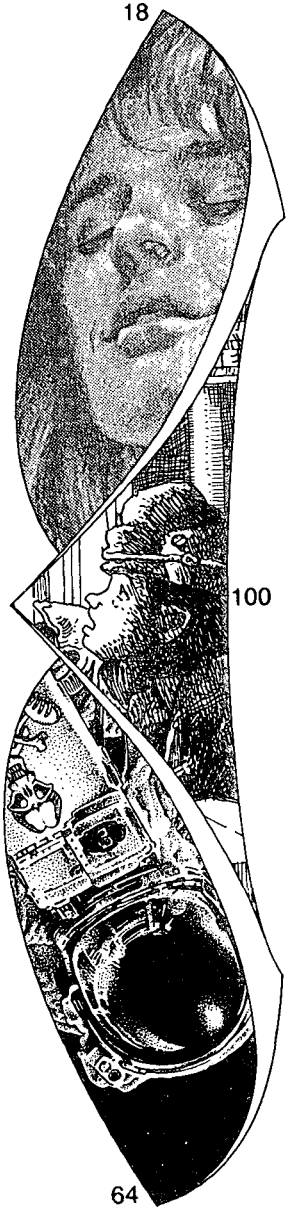

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EDITORIAL

by Isaac Asimov

HALF-DONE

Consider the following story. In a small town, in the old days, a poor tailor had an ill-favored and rather stupid daughter for whom he could find no husband. He therefore called in a marriage broker.

The marriage broker suggested one possibility and the tailor said, "But he's the son of the richest man in town."

"So much the better. He'll make a wonderful match for your girl."

"But his family are a bunch of scoffers. They never go to a house of worship. They are irreligious. How can my pious daughter marry into such a family?"

"But he's handsome, intelligent, and rich. So he scoffs a little. To tell you the truth, your daughter is not such a prize."

After a long argument, the tailor agreed, and the marriage broker departed and said to himself as he walked toward the house of the richest man in town, "Well, *her* family agrees. Half-done!"

The moral of the story is: Half-done is sometimes hardly begun.

For instance, the universe may have come into being 15 billion years ago. Therefore, 7.5 billion years ago, the universe was half-way to the present moment. It was half-done. And where did it stand? Why, our own solar system still did not exist and would not for another 3 billion years. The entire development of Earth and man fits into the second half of the universe-existence.

Then, let's consider the solar system only. It, including the Earth, of course, was formed 4.6 billion years ago. The Earth was half-way to the present (half-done, so to speak), 2.3 billion years ago. Where did it stand, at that time?

It bore life, but the most advanced forms were prokaryotes — bacteria and cyanobacteria. Eukaryotes, the kind of cells in plants and animals, from amoebae to human beings, would not yet be formed for another billion years. The entire development of plant and animal life, therefore, fits into the second half of Earth-existence, and into the final 1/11 of the universe's existence.

In that case, let's think about eukaryote development only. The first eukaryotes may have formed 1.4 billion years ago. Eukaryotic development was half done then about 0.7 billion (that is,

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700,000,000) years ago. Where did things stand then?

Multicellular life had begun, but it consisted at best of primitive worm-like creatures. No organisms sufficiently advanced to form shells or other parts that fossilized easily had yet come into existence. In particular, chordates—the group of animals to which we belong—would not come into existence for another 150,000,000 years. The entire development of chordate life therefore fits into the second half of the existence of multicellular life, and into the final 1/28 of the universe's existence.

The first chordates came into existence about 550,000,000 years ago. Chordates were therefore half-done about 275,000,000 years ago. There had been notable progress. Chordate life had conquered the land and the first reptiles had come into existence by then. However, even the simplest mammals did not yet exist and would not for another 55,000,000 years. The entire development of mammalian life, from the simplest monotreme to man, fits into the second half of the existence of chordate life, and into the final 1/68 of the universe's existence.

Let's keep on. The first mammals appeared about 220,000,000 years ago, and their development was half-done about 110,000,000 years ago. At that time, there were no primates (the order to which we belong) and wouldn't be for another 40,000,000 years. The entire development of primate life, from the

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simplest tree-shrew to man, fits into the second half of mammalian development, and the final 1/375 of the universe's existence.

The first primates appeared 70,000,000 years ago and were half-done 35,000,000 years ago. At that time, monkeys had evolved but no apes yet existed and wouldn't for another 5,000,000 years. The entire development of apes, from the most primitive gibbon to man, fits into the second half of primate development, and the final 1/500 of the universe's existence.

The first apes appeared 30,000,000 years ago, and the development was half-done 15,000,000 years ago. By that time the first creatures recognizable as "great apes," the common ancestors of chimpanzees, gorillas and so on, existed, but no hominid did —nothing that was clearly on the way to human development—and wouldn't for another 10,000,000 years. The entire development of hominids from the most primitive australopithecine to modern man fits into the second half of ape-development and into the final 1/3000 of the universe's existence.

Let's not stop. The first hominids were australopithecines who appeared about 5,000,000 years ago. Hominid development was half done 2,500,000 years ago. By that time the only hominids were still australopithecines and there were no creatures that belonged to the classification Homo (our own genus) and wouldn't be for another 500,000 years. The entire development of Genus Homo, then, fits into the second half of hominid development and into the final 1/7500 of the universe's existence.

Genus Homo first appeared about 2,000,000 years ago and was half-done about 1,000,000 years ago. At that time, *Homo sapiens* in even its earliest form ("Neanderthal man"), had not yet evolved and would not for some 700,000 years. The entire history of *Homo sapiens* fits into the second half of the development of Genus Homo and into the final 1/50,000 of the universe's existence.

Homo sapiens first came into being 300,000 years ago and was half-done 150,000 years ago, at which time "modern man" had not yet appeared and would not for another 100,000 years. The entire tale of modern man then fits into the second half of the development of *Homo sapiens* and into the final 1/300,000 of the universe's existence.

Modern man made an appearance about 50,000 years ago and was half-done 25,000 years ago, at which time he was spreading into Australia and the Americas, but civilization had not yet begun and would not for another 15,000 years. Thus, the story of civilization fits into the second half of the development of modern man and the final 1/1,500,000 of the universe's existence.

Civilization began about 10,000 years ago (or 8000 B.C.) with the development of agriculture and the growth of the first cities. Civiliza-

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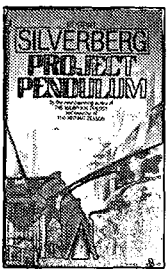

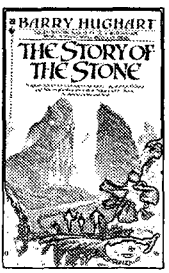

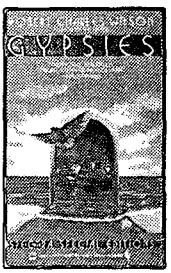

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THE STORY OF THE STONE
A few years ago, Barry Hughart published a novel called *Bridge of Birds*. It was the story of an "ancient China that never was" and it captured the hearts of reviewers (from *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* to *The New Yorker*), readers (it's still a hot book in sf stores all over the country) and award-givers (it won the World Fantasy Award for Best Novel). Last year, our sister imprint, Foundation, published the sequel to that novel, THE STORY OF THE STONE, in hardcover and Spectra has just published the paperback. We promise that you can't get the kind of experience Hughart provides anywhere else. The *Washington Post Book World* compared it to "an Oriental Holmes and Watson plunked down in an Indiana Jones movie." *Kirkus Reviews* called it a "rich, rare, witty, wise performance, bubbling over with delights: utterly mesmerizing and absolutely not to be missed." And *Library Journal* said it "reaffirms Hughart's gift for comic fantasy as well as his talent for ingenious storytelling."

GYPSIES
People are beginning to discover Robert Charles Wilson. The buzz began about his first novel, *A Hidden Place.* It continued with his second, *Memory Wire.* And with his third, GYPSIES, the buzz is turning into a roar. When the Foundation hardcover edition was published, *Publishers Weekly* called it an "intensely chilling fantasy...a blend of science fiction, mystery and thriller, this spellbinding novel concludes in electrifying fashion." Kirkus called it a "distinctive, beautifully turned alternate worlds yarn...flawlessly plotted, convincingly peopled, satisfyingly detailed...admirable work from a promising new talent." Now this novel about people who can open doors to other realities and the man who stalks them makes its paperback debut in our Spectra Special Editions program. Find out what all the noise is about.

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tion would therefore be half-done about 5000 years ago (or 3000 B.C.) By that time the first "high civilization," that of Sumeria, would have come into existence. Writing would have just been developed and with that actual history began. It follows, then, that all of human history fits into the second half of the tale of civilization and into the final 1/3,000,000 of the universe's existence.

Even now, we're not finished. History begins at about 3000 B.C. (5000 years ago), and the tale is half done about 2500 years ago or about 500 B.C. We are still in ancient history, and Christianity, for instance, does not exist and would not for another 500 years. The history of Christianity fits into the second half of historical times and into the final 1/7,500,000 of the universe's existence.

Christianity began with the birth of Jesus in 4 B.C., 1993 years ago, and was half-done in A.D. 992. We were just emerging from the Dark Ages then, and Columbus would not discover America (the beginning of "modern times") for another 500 years. All of modern times, then, fits into the second half of the history of Christianity and into the final 1/30,000,000 of the universe's existence.

Modern times began in 1492, 497 years ago, and was half done 248 years ago, which was 1741. At that time the United States had not yet gained its independence and would not for another 25 years. The entire history of the United States as an independent nation therefore fits into the second half of modern times and into the final 1/70,000,000 of the universe's existence. With that, let's stop!

Now, the reason I have gone through this litany is to show you that each step in the development of what we are today fits into the second half of the step before; that in each case, half-done is scarcely begun.

Think about it and you will see that all this indicates that the rate of change (at least of those changes of interest to present-day humanity) has been steadily increasing through all the history of the universe.

To science fiction people this brings up two points of interest:

1. How long can it go on? Nothing can continue to increase faster and faster forever. Always there must be an inflection point where whatever is measured starts slowing down. A plateau is reached and, very likely, a decline sets in. What will life be like when the inflection point in rate of change is passed?

2. It is common for science fiction stories to be set in the far future. My own Foundation stories are set 20,000 years in the future. But suppose they were set only 500 years in the future. Considering the steadily increasing rate of change, how can I possibly dare to extrapolate even 500 years?—I do it, and so do other science fiction writers, but I think that's only the valor of ignorance. ●

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LETTERS

Dear Dr. Asimov,

I just received the February 1989 issue of your magazine and, as usual, turned first to your editorial column, this one titled "Sage." I would like to point out one slight error. During the winter of 1985-86 I wrote to you asking for information concerning where I might locate a copy of one of your books which was (gasp!) out of print. You were kind enough to provide, free of charge, not information, but a copy of the book itself. Even someone who writes as much as you and makes as much from his writing as you cannot do this for all of his fans, and I was both pleased and impressed that you would go to that trouble. My point is that I remember sending you a thank-you note, albeit a few months late. My excuse for tardiness was that I was in the process of moving while this exchange was taking place and that my confusion during the moving process temporarily overcame common courtesy.

I write this letter now not to embarrass you but to thank you for myself and the thousands of others for whom you have provided uncountable numbers of hours of pleasure and education (I read your non-fiction as well as your fiction). I first ran into the Foundation Trilogy in its SF Book Club edition mumble-mumble years ago when I was in the ninth grade. I made it half way through the second book when I decided that it didn't have enough action for me (my tastes ran more toward Sci-Fi than SF, to use a modern idiom); but I kept it because I knew it was something I would grow into. About a year later I started over again and couldn't put it down. It was amazing how much better a writer you had become as I grew older! (Apologies to Mark Twain!) I was so impressed that through the nearly twenty years which passed before the fourth book of the Trilogy appeared I could remember the power in the last four words of *Second Foundation,* "Preem Palver—First Speaker." (Yes, I remembered his name!)

From Hari Seldon it was on to Lije Bailey and R. Daneel Olivaw, Susan Calvin and all the others, as well as on to Heinlein, Anderson, Dickson, Simak, etc. In fact it is not an exaggeration to say that it was not until I progressed from Sci-Fi to SF that I began to understand what my English teachers had been trying to tell me all along, that books could stimulate more than just my emotions with adventure; they could stimulate my mind with ideas. Books and I have become such good friends that I now find

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it as much fun to buy them as to read them. In fact I do the former much faster than the latter, and I have about a five year backlog of unread books waiting for me with six in progress at any given time! (If Barry Longyear is even half as prolific as you, I'll need a separate building for my library!)

My daughter is two and a half (I'm a slow starter!) and has already learned to recognize many letters; words are next, then ideas. I hope I can instill some of my enthusiasm for ideas in her, but I'm not too worried. After all, I have the help of you and your fellow sages and sages-to-be. You are right, sages are to be used—to make the world a better place. But they should also be thanked.

Thank you,

Steve Johnston
Carol Stream, IL

Thank you for all the kind words. There's no better way to start a youngster to thinking than to supply him or her with appropriate science fiction stories. I've always thought that.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

I have been a newsstand subscriber to your magazine for years and have enjoyed many good times and a few not so good with you. I am thankful that Mr. Dozois has returned the magazine to a good fiction platform. The years when it was being used to advance the cause of women's liberation were particularly trying for me. (I don't expect you to agree with me about this last, but wouldn't this world be a boring place if everyone agreed with everyone else?)

There have been some really outstanding stories in recent months. "A Midwinter's Tale" was great. "The Last Thunder Horse West of the Mississippi" also. "Madonna of the Wolves" missed by a narrow margin, being spoiled by unnecessarily explicit, displeasing language.

I agree with you about censorship, finding it totally repugnant. I do wish more authors would write quality fiction without the needless use of offensive language. Not that I find all four-letter words offensive, I just feel that they should be used only when necessary. There seems to be a trend to use them just because we can.

Sincerely yours,

Henry F. Smith
Box 2431
APO Miami 34002

I don't think we were ever deliberately trying to advance the cause of women's liberation. Can it be a bit of over-sensitivity on your part? Of course, all of us here are for freedom, decency, sweetness, and niceness and women's liberation may come under those headings.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Mr. Dozois,

I'm writing to express my appreciation and amazement for your January 1989 issue. This is the best issue of *IAsfm* yet, and I've read 'em all, from the beginning. I'm not even finished with it yet, and I've read two Hugo-quality pieces. "The Ring of Memory" rivals

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"Enemy Mine" for the best work the magazine has ever published, while "Iridescence" stands near it. "Silver Lady and the Fortyish Man" follows the others very closely, too. Each story features real characters who begin in an agitated emotional state, but come to some sort of peace or resolution for themselves by the end of the story. That's what great literature does, and that's the kind of story I'd love to see you publish more of. "Iridescence" succeeds as both a story and an allegory, without being either portentous or pretentious. Megan Lindholm manages to capture the theme of "Silver Lady" in the style of the writing—magical, made even more potent by contrast with the mundane. Another story, "Real Time," is a black diamond —dark, hard, and sharp. Pat Murphy's piece in this issue, "Prescience," though short, is as always a pleasure. Even the poem (and I usually wish you would devote less space to poetry) was solid work.

I'm glad I stuck with the magazine through the lightweight George Scithers years.

Well, back now to finish the magazine. See you at Noreascon!

Lee G. Schlesinger
150 Pine Hill Circle
Waltham, MA 02154

And yet, on the other hand, "Enemy Mine" was a product of the George Scithers years. Our succession of editors have had their various views, but each did his or her best to publish quality science fiction. And Gardner is doing very well, too, as all admit.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Editors Asimov and Dozois,

Having just read your Mid-December issue, I would like to commend and thank you for printing Norman Spinrad's excellent column on the graphic novel in your "On Books" section.

As an avid science fiction *and* comic book fan, I hope that Mr. Spinrad's article will help to open up a few skeptical eyes so they can see the vast wealth of excellent stories and artwork being published today as comic books. In its own unique way, the comic industry is as rife with talent today as science fiction was in the sixties. I long for the day when comic pioneers such as Alan Moore, Frank Miller, Mike Baron, Art Spiegleman, et al., are ranked with the greats of the science fiction field.

An important section in Mr. Spinrad's column described the maturity with which the populace of France (and Japan, which was not mentioned) has accepted the graphic novel as a new cultural medium. Unfortunately, as is all too often typical, North America has shown no such maturity. Even today, the industry is deluged with hordes of steroid-inflated, long-johned "super-heroes" beating the tar out of each other. The post-WW II obsession with these clowns has given the comic industry a near-unshakeable stigma which leads most adults to dismiss comics as child's fare. By the mid-sixties, as well, this obsession led to the practical extinction of other comics genres such as war, humor, western, and even romance.

Hope is returning, however. Intelligent, mature comics are beginning to show that they have the

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ability to survive, even thrive, in the super-hero wasteland. No longer the realm of pre-pubescent power fantasies, comics are attracting larger numbers of people who are mature enough to accept and demand more substantial material. Some North Americans are beginning to realize that an easily accessible and affordable medium is in full bloom right under their noses!

While I realize that my opinion is just that, my opinion, there are several books I believe readers of *IAsfm* would thoroughly enjoy. These are listed here in no order of importance or favor.

1. Two incredible talents, Mike Baron and Steve Rude, have come up with some brilliant SF in their book called *Nexus*. (First Comics)
2. Alan Moore and John Totleben, in the award-winning *Miracleman*, have given us an intensely horrifying view of what a superman would really be like. (Eclipse Comics)
3. In *Grendel*, creator Matt Wagner uses the demon of our own mediocrity and ugliness to devastate us with the truths of our existence. (Comico)
4. The brilliance of Harlan Ellison's Kyben stories is enhanced even further by artist Ken Steacy in the *Night and the Enemy* graphic novel. (Comico)
5. Frank Miller, in his wild and kinky *Elektra: Assassin*, takes the reader on a joy-ride of epic proportions through the worlds of politics, love, and sex. Excellent art by Bill Sienkiewicz. (Marvel-Epic)
6. For those who occasionally need a dose of mindless violence, Mike Baron's *The Punisher* will give you what you need, and more. (Marvel)
7. The works of Alan Moore and Frank Miller are well documented, but of particular importance are *Swamp Thing* #20-64 by Moore and any *Daredevil* story by Miller. Both are excellent examples of what a simple comic book can become if it is given the right creative force. (*Swamp Thing* from DC, *Daredevil* from Marvel)

Don't be afraid to seek these stories out. Quality comic books need the support of science fiction readers because the two mediums share so many of the same characteristics. Comic book specialty stores abound in every major city on this continent and any store owner worth his salt can help you find back-issues. Trust me, it will be well worth your time and effort. Thank you.

Yours truly,

Jim Tomlinson

I cannot honestly say I'm a fan of comics, but even in the old days, I remember there were some that I thought were good at an adult level. Pardon me for nostalgia, but there was Terry and the Pirates *by Milt Caniff;* Li'l Abner *by Al Capp; and, most of all,* The Spirit *by Will Eisner. I even recall appreciating* Playboy's Little Annie Fannie *for some reason.*

—Isaac Asimov

Readers may be interested to learn that some of our own stories, and stories by people associated with the magazine, have recently sold to

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Eclipse Comics. Eclipse will be publishing a series entitled Orbit, The Best of Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine. *The first issue will include "Windwagon Smith and the Martians," by Lawrence Watt-Evans; "Silent Night," by Ben Bova; and "Marooned off Vesta," by Isaac Asimov. Neal Barrett, Jr.'s Hugo- and Nebula-award nominee, "Ginny Sweethips' Flying Circus," is among those slated for the second issue.*

—Sheila Williams

Dear Dr. Asimov:

I have enjoyed your magazine for several years, especially because I know I can expect a high standard of writing. The tales (if not always entirely to my liking) are good stories which often contain disturbing or mentally stimulating ideas. You might think that calling a story a good story is not much of a compliment but I sing with a local chorus and I know that there is a big difference in singing the notes as opposed to creating music. I think that telling a good story is definitely equivalent to creating music.

I have never felt uncomfortable reading *IAsfm* until the February 1989 issue. The first story I read was "The Oniomancer." The main character was named Suki (mine is Sukey which is English not Oriental) and she had a knack for finding things. Don't laugh, I find things, too: silver chains, gold chains, turquoise pendants, coins galore, dolls, odds and ends, and just last night, a flexible metal belt when I went grocery shopping. I do not wear earrings but I do wear combinations of brooches, chains, and earrings (which I use like decorative pins) that mix the glitz with the funky and are definitely eyecatching. No, my hair is not bleached nor does it have fuschia streaks but it is short. There wasn't any biographical information in the introductory paragraph about Lisa Mason, the author of this story, and the other two stories she's written for *IAsfm* do not contain much information about her in their introductions either, but if she is into spooky things, she certainly spooked me.

By the way, I enjoyed the rest of the magazine, too, but after "The Oniomancer" the other stories were anticlimactic.

Yours truly,

Sukey Lutman

P S: I think a sense of humor is one of humankind's best traits. Please don't stop publishing funny, silly, ridiculous, humorous, or however-you-wish-to-describe-them stories. Smiles, fortunately, can be very catching.

Coincidences will *take place. Have you ever heard Asimov's First Law of Coincidence? It goes as follows: "If a million events are considered, there may well be one among them that has only a one-in-a-million chance of happening."*

—Isaac Asimov

Dr. Asimov:

I'm surprised that you yielded your *correct* position about the bow and the string.* A bowstring that is always kept taut *does* lose its spring (elasticity). All materials (except brittle ones) have a point called "yield point" above which

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the material will *not* spring back. *Below* the yield point they *will* spring back. This is in a short time the tensile pull. However, a string kept taut will also exhibit something called "stress relaxation" where yielding (not breaking) occurs. This phenomenon is what you referred to in your statement.

It seems that even though you've never held a bow—you *intuitively* knew about "stress relaxation." Trust your feelings.

Yours Truly,

Calvin Hall
Ft. Worth, TX

* p.14, December 1988 issue.

PS: Karl owes *you* an apology. Keep up the good work.

Somehow, I feel I'm in the middle on this. I have a feeling I ought to duck and let the blow pass over my head.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Messrs Asimov and Dozois:

The February 1989 issue of *IAsfm* is the best in a long time. The Editorial was superb as always, the Letters were entertaining. Gaming I did not read and could do without, and On Books was very informative, as usual. I suppose the convention calendar is a necessity, although I never read it.

As to the stories, both novellas were good. Moffett's story was a very believable account of a future-with-AIDS. I did think that some of the transvestite material was unnecessary, but it was not offensive. Sheffield's story was excellent, as always.

The other stories were good, except for Effinger's rather tired alternate universe story, which I was unable to finish. Really, I am getting tired of alternate-past-universe stories, and I didn't like Silverberg's "Sailing to Byzantium" either. My type of alternate universe story is typified by Gregory Benford's wonderful *Timescape,* Busby's *All These Earths,* and Heinlein's *The Number of the Beast.* Incidentally, I have always thought that Benford could have named his novel *Time Escape.*

To summarize, the February issue has a greater science fictional and less fantasy content than you have had in a long time, and that is all to the good.

Edward L. Corton
Temple Hills, MD

What you're really saying is that alternate-time stories aren't any good unless they're good. *But that's true of everything, isn't it?*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

A little earlier today, I picked up a copy of the February issue of *IAsfm* and so far have read only your editorial, "Sage." Although I can hardly wait to devour the tasty treats that surely follow, I felt I had to take time out for this missive, for it was your editorial (along with my need for your manuscript guidelines) that prompted this letter.

I had read a couple of science fiction works before I was first introduced to the superb, visionary writing contained in one of the all-time great collections of short SF, *Adventures in Time and Space.* But it was the stories in this book, in-

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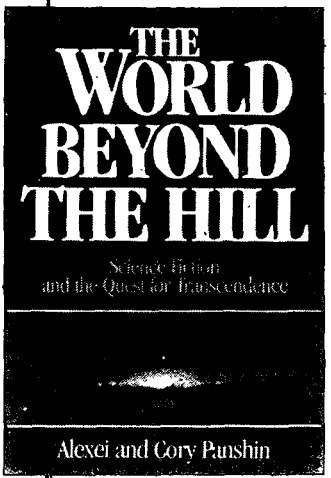

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cluding your brilliant work, "Nightfall," which quite literally changed the way I perceived the world (and universe) surrounding me—all this at the tender, impressionable age of eleven. "Nightfall" was the first of many of your works that I've read and reread. During the ensuing twenty-five years, I've felt as if I've come to know you personally through your writing. Not in the sense that I know your personal habits, likes, and dislikes, but that I've come to understand the way you *think*. It's as if you've become a favorite and trusted uncle whose sage advice and insights I know I can count on. My respect for you and your accomplishments is tremendous. Needless to say, the elegance with which you conceived your Three Laws of Robotics will ensure that they endure long after you or I have passed on. They are most certainly destined to become a cornerstone in the philosophy of the real world of artificial intelligence.

So what am I getting at? Just this: Whether you like it or not—whether you desire to be or not, you *are* a sage to millions of us. It is not a destiny one can choose, but it is a responsibility that a true sage will graciously accept, although with a few misgivings, perhaps. And it is by his wisdom and compassion that one demonstrates and reaffirms his worthiness. So, on behalf of all of those who have asked and received your help, your thoughts, your pronouncements, but who have, for whatever reason, failed to show their appreciation, I thank you for your kindness and attention, and

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would ask that you continue to find it within yourself to share your thoughts with the rest of us on some personal level as time permits. May you always prosper and may your words never be forgotten . . . and may you look favorably upon the story I'll be submitting to you soon.

Michael W. McBroom
3844 Earle Avenue
Rosemead, CA 91770

Well, thank you. Would you believe that there are some people who disagree with you and send me very nasty letters which reflect adversely on my character and ancestry? Naturally, I think you are much more intelligent than they are.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear *IAsfm:*

In August of 1985 I was first introduced to the world of science fiction. My mother was in the U.S. on business for a little over a month, during which time I was obliged to enroll and attend school. Seeing as I was to study in America for a short period of time only, no limits were placed on the classes in which I chose to enlist. As a result, I composed a rather haphazard (but very satisfactory) schedule, which included two drama courses, two science courses, a course specializing in Indian folklore, and (on a rash impulse), a course specializing in science fiction.

I had never before encountered adult fantasy or science fiction, but after reading Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles* and such classic short stories as "Flowers for Algernon" and "All Summer in a Day," I was hooked. Upon returning to Jerusalem I tore through my mother's bookshelves, searching for some science fiction. I discovered a few collections of short science fiction stories, but alas! Within a week I had read and reread them all. I then progressed to weekly bookstore raids. For a while, I was happy; till my mother rightfully complained about the *expensiveness* of my hobby. Regrettably I do not know of any worthy English libraries or second-hand bookstores in Jerusalem.

When my family returned to the U.S. for a year, I was given the delightful gift of a surprise subscription to *IAsfm.* I would like to express my *extreme* satisfaction and pleasure with the four issues I have already received. I *do* enjoy the stories published in *IAsfm,* almost without exception. I am especially pleased with the March 1989 edition.[1] Robert Silverberg's "In Another Country" and Harlan Ellison's "The Few, the Proud" were thrilling and stimulating. Janet Kagan's "The Loch Moose Monster" was amusing, entertaining, and well written. Just please explain one thing to me, what is James Kelly's "Dancing With the Chairs" doing in a *science fiction* magazine? I see no way to define it as SF.

Gili Bar-Hillel (age 14)
(presently) Pittsburgh, PA

We are delighted to hook young people on science fiction. It stimulates the blood flow, sparkles the eyes, refreshes the mind and makes one more attractive to the opposite sex. As Nancy Reagan would say: "When offered science fiction, just say 'yes.'"

—Isaac Asimov

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NEAT STUFF

by Matthew J. Costello

I was talking with author/editor Jane Yolen about writing and selling fantasy fiction and about her upcoming books *White Jenna,* from Tor, and *Dove Isabeau,* illustrated by Dennis Nolan, from HBJ. Jane mentioned that the new frontier for fantasy would be "exploring a different mythos, not just Celtic, not just Nordic, but getting more into the American Indian, the Polynesian, the African, . . . whatever we haven't really touched on."

I asked Jane if anyone had ever attempted a contemporary novelization of *The Ring of the Nibelungen,* the basis for Richard Wagner's mega-series of four long operas? Here there are giants, and a dragon, and a magic helmet, and powerful gods, and enchanted swords. The four music dramas—as they were described by Richard Wagner—are, in 1989, never more popular, with new productions in opera houses, two complete Ring cycles on CD, and a series on CD Video LaserDiscs documenting the historic 1976 production at Bayreuth, Wagner's private theater in Bavaria built exclusively for his own work.

Jane didn't know of any Ring-based novels, though she had plans to do an adaptation for young adults.

It was amazing information. My own experience of the Ring was at a *cause célèbre* production at the 1976 Bayreuth summer festival, the premiere of Patrice Chereau and Richard Peduzzi's production of *The Ring of the Nibelungen.* Now, to understand the impact of the production perhaps a brief discussion of the work is in order.

There are four music dramas —not operas, since Wagner didn't write arias, or duets. The music moves from one emotional event to another, using a system of leitmotifs, musical themes that signify feelings, objects, and characters. The themes—beautiful in themselves—change and develop over the four nights of the opera.

The story is classic fantasy, based on Nordic Sagas, the Edda, and the myths of the Volsung. Alberich, a dwarf, steals the Rhinegold from the mermaids that guard it. He can only do this by renouncing love forever. With the gold, Alberich is able to craft a magical helmet—the tarnhelm—which allows him to become a dragon, and he stockpiles his incredible treasure.

But Wotan, ruler of the guards, has to pay some impatient giants for building his palatial estate,

(Continued on page 135)

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Megan Lindholm, whose popular story "Silver Lady and the Fortyish Man" appeared in our January issue, returns to our pages with a deeply moving science fiction tale about "A Touch of Lavender." Ms. Lindholm is currently working on a novel, tentatively titled *Cloven Hooves*, for Bantam Books.

A TOUCH OF LAVENDER

by Megan Lindholm

art: A. C. Farley

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We grew up like mice nesting in a rotting sofa, my sister and I. Even when I was only nine and she was an infant, I thought of us that way. At night, when she'd be asleep in the curl of my belly and I'd be half-falling off the old sofa we used as a bed, I'd hear the mice nibbling and moving inside the upholstery beneath us, and sometimes the tiny squeakings of the new-born ones when the mother came to nurse them. I'd curl tighter around Lisa and pretend she was a little pink baby mouse instead of a little pink baby girl, and that I was the father mouse, curled around her to protect her. Sometimes it made the nights less chill.

I'd lived in the same basement apartment all my life. It was always chill, even in summer. It was an awful place, dank and ratty, but the upstairs apartments were worse, rank with urine and rot. The building was an old townhouse, long ago converted to four apartments upstairs and one in the basement. None of them were great, but ours was the cheapest, because we had the furnace and the water heater right next to us. When I was real small, three or so, a water main beside the building broke, and water came rising up in our apartment, maybe a foot deep. I woke up to my stuff floating beside me, and the old couch sucking up water like a sponge. I yelled for Mom. I heard the splash as she rolled out of bed in the only bedroom and then her cussing as she waded through the water to pick me up. Her current musician took the whole thing as a big joke, until he saw his sax case floating. Then he grabbed up his stuff and was out of there. I don't remember seeing him after that.

My mom and I spent that day sitting on the steps down to our apartment, waiting for the city maintenance crew to fix the pipe, waiting for the water to go down and then waiting for our landlord.

He finally came and looked the place over and nodded, and said, hell, it was probably for the best, he'd been meaning to put down new tile and spraysulate the walls anyway. "You go ahead and tear out the old stuff," he told my Mom. "Stack it behind the house, and I'll have it hauled away. Let me know when you're ready, and I'll send in a crew to fix the place up. Now about your rent . . ."

"I told you, I already mailed it," my Mom said coldly, looking past his ear, and the landlord sighed and drove off.

So my Mom and her friends peeled up the cracking linoleum and tore the sheetrock off the walls, leaving the bare concrete floor with stripes of mastic showing and the two-by-four wall studs standing bare against the grey block walls. That was as far as the re-modeling ever got. The landlord never hauled the stuff away, or sent in a crew. He never spraysulated the walls, either. Even in the summer the walls were cool and misty, and in winter it was like the inside of a refrigerator.

My Mom wasn't so regular about paying the rent that she could raise a fuss. Most of the folks in our building were like that: pay when you

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can, and don't stay home when you can't, so the landlord can't nag at you. The apartments were lousy, but complaining could get you kicked out. All the tenants knew that if the landlord had wanted to, he could have gotten a government grant to convert the place into Skoag units and really made a bundle. We were right on the edge of a Skoag sector and demand for Skoag units was increasing.

That was back when the Skoags were first arriving and there wasn't much housing for them. It all had to be agency approved, too, to prevent any "interplanetary incidents." Can't have aliens falling down the steps and breaking a flipper, even if they are pariah aliens. These outcasts were the only link we had to their planet and culture, and especially to their technology for space travel that the whole world was so anxious to have. No one knew where they came from or how they got to earth. They just started wading out of the seas one day, not all that different from a washed-up Cuban. Just more wet-back aliens, as the joke went. They were very open about being exiles with no means of returning home. They arrived gradually, in groups of three and four, but of the ships that brought them there was never any sign and the Skoags weren't saying anything. That didn't stop any of the big government people from hoping, though. Hoping that if we were real nice to them, they might drop a hint or two about interstellar drives or something. So the Skoags got the government-subsidized housing with showers that worked and heat lamps and carpeted floors and spraysulated walls. The Federal Budget Control bill said that funds could be reapportioned, but the budget could not be increased, so folks like my Mom and I took a giant step downwards in the housing arena. But as a little kid, all I understood was that our place was cold most of the time, and everyone in the neighborhood hated Skoags.

I don't think it really bothered Mom. She wasn't home that much anyway. She'd bitch about it sometimes when she brought a bunch of her friends home, to jam and smoke and eat. It was always the same scene, party time, she'd come in with a bunch of them, hyped on the music like she always was, stoned maybe, too. They'd be carrying instruments and six-packs of beer, sometimes a brown bag of cheap groceries, salami and cheese and crackers or yogurt and rice cakes and tofu. They'd set the groceries and beer out on the table and start doodling around with their instruments while my Mom would say stuff like, "Damn, look at this dump. That damn landlord, he still hasn't been around. Billy, didn't the landlord come by today? No? Shit, man, that jerk's been promising to fix this place for a year now. Damn."

Everyone would tell her not to sweat it, hell, their places were just as bad, all landlords were assholes anyway. Usually someone would get onto the Skoag thing, how it was a fine thing the government could take

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care of alien refugee trash but wouldn't give its own citizens a break on rent. If there'd been a lot of Skoags at the cafe that night, Mom and her friends would get into how Skoags thought they were such hot shit, synthesizing music from their greasy hides. I remember one kid who really got worked up, telling everyone that they'd come to earth to steal our music. According to him, the government knew it and didn't care. He said there was even a secret treaty that would give the Skoags free use of all copyrighted music in the U.S. if they would give us blueprints of their ships. No one paid much attention to him. Later that evening, when he was really stoned, he came and sat on the floor by my sofa and cried. He told me that he was a really great musician, except that he couldn't afford a good synthesizer to compose on, while those damn Skoags could just puff out their skins and make every sound anybody had ever heard. He leaned real close and told me that the real danger was that the Skoags would make up all the good music before he even got a chance to try. Which I knew was dumb. While Skoags can play anything they've ever heard, perfectly, no one had ever heard them play anything original. No one had ever heard them play Skoag music, only ours. I started to tell him that but he passed out on the floor by my sofa. Everyone ignored him. They were into the food and the beer and the music. All my Mom's parties were like that.

I'd usually curl up on one end of the sofa, face to the cushions, and try to sleep, sometimes with a couple necking at the other end of the sofa and two or three musicians in the kitchen, endlessly rehearsing the same few bars of a song I'd never heard before and would never hear again. That's what my Mom was really into, struggling musicians that were performing their own stuff in the little "play for tips" places. She'd latch onto some guy and keep him with her aid check. She'd watch over him like he was gold, go with him every day, sit by him on the sidewalk while he played if he were a street musician, or take a table near the band if he was working cafes and clubs. They'd come home late and sleep late, and then get up and go out again. Sometimes I'd come in from school and find them sitting at the kitchen table, talking. It's funny, the men always looked the same, eyes like starved dogs, and it seems like my Mom would always be saying the same thing. "Don't give up. You've got a real talent. Someday you'll make it, and you'll look back at them and laugh. You've really got it, Lennie (or Bobby or Pete or Lance). I know it. I can feel it, I can hear it. You're gonna be big one day."

The funny part is, she was always right. Those guys would live with us for a few months or a year, and suddenly, out of the blue, their careers would take off. They'd be discovered, on a sidewalk or in a cafe, or picked up by a band on its way up. They'd leave my Mom, and go on to better things. She never got bitter about it, though she liked to brag to other

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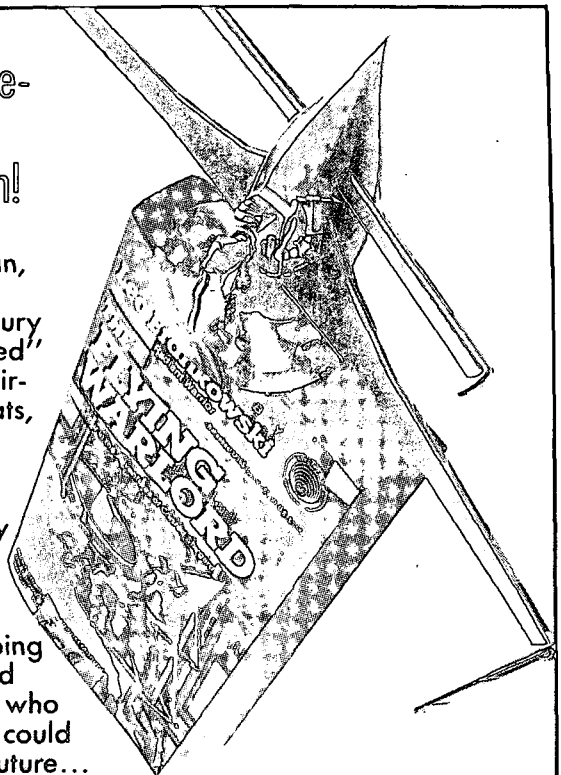

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women about all the hot ones she'd known "back when they were nothing." Like that was her calling in life, feeding guitar humpers until someone besides her could hear their songs. Like only she could keep the real music flowing. One night she brought home a disc and gave it to me. It was called "Fire Eyes" and the guy on the front had dark hair and blue eyes, like me. "That's your daddy, Billy boy," she told me. "Though he don't know it. He took off before I knew you were coming, and was on a national tour by the time you were born. Look at those pretty, pretty eyes. Same as you, kid. You should have heard him sing, Billy. I knew he had it, even then. Even then." I think that was the first time I ever saw her sit down and cry. I'm still not sure if she was crying over my dad leaving us, or something else. She didn't cry long, and she went to bed alone that night. But the next night she brought home a whole pack of musicians from some open mike. By next morning, my Mom had a new musician in her bed.

Sometimes during a party, if my Mom was really stoned, or safe-sexing someone in the bedroom, I'd get up in my pajamas and make for the food, stuffing down as much as I could and hiding a couple of rice cakes or a handful of crackers behind the sofa cushion. I knew the mice would nibble on it, but hell, they never took much, just lacing around the edges. I figured they didn't do much better than I did anyway. If I was really lucky, there'd be some girls in the group, and they'd fuss over me, telling me how my big blue eyes were such a surprise with my dark hair, and giving me gum and Lifesavers from their purses, or maybe quarters and pennies. Like people in sidewalk cafes feed sparrows. If my Mom caught me, she'd get mad and tell me to get to sleep, I had school tomorrow and didn't I want to make something of myself? Then she'd smile at everyone like she was really saying something and go, in a real sweety voice, "If you miss school tomorrow, you miss music class, too. You don't want that to happen, do you?" As if I gave a shit. She was always bragging that I had my Daddy's voice, and someday I was going to be a singer, how my music was my life, and that the school music lesson was the only way she could get me to go to school.

Dumb. Like singing "Farmer in the Dell" with forty other bored first graders was teaching me a lot about music. Music was okay, but I never understood how people could live for it like my Mom did. She'd never learned to play any instrument, and while she could carry a tune, her voice was nothing special. But she lived for music, like it was air or food. Funny. I think the men she took in might have respected her more if she'd been able to create even a little of what she craved so badly. I could see it in their eyes, sometimes, that they looked down on her. Like she wasn't real to them because she couldn't make her own music. But my mother lived music, more than they did. She had to have it all the time,

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the stereo was always playing when she didn't have an in-house musician of her own. I'd fall asleep to her swaying to the music, singing along in her mediocre voice. Sometimes she'd just be sprawled in our battered easy chair, her head thrown back, one hand steadying a mug of tea or a beer on her belly. Her brown eyes would be dark and gone, not seeing me or the bare wall studs, not seeing the ratty couch or scarred cupboards. Music took her somewhere, and I used to wonder where. I thought it was dumb, the way she lived for a collection of sounds, for someone else's words and notes.

I know the day my life changed. I was about three blocks from home, partway into the Skoag sector, listening to some Skoags on a street corner. Not listening, really, so much as watching them puff their greasy skins out until they looked like those stupid balloon animals Roxie the clown used to make for my Headstart class. Then when they were all puffed out, membrane ballooned over corally bone webs, they'd start making music, the skin going in and out just like speaker cones on really old speakers like my Mom had. They reminded me of frogs, because of how their throats puffed out to croak, and because of the wet green-yellow glints on their skins.

I kept a safe distance from them. Everyone did. From the "Don't Do Drugs" sessions at school, I knew what the stuff on their skin could do to me. I'd seen Skoag gropies, wandering around bald-eyed, hands reaching to grope any passing Skoag, to get one more rush even if it deafened them. Skoag gropies were always getting killed, squashed by cars and trucks they could no longer hear, or dreaming themselves to death, forgetting to eat or drink, forgetting everything but groping a fingerful of Skoag slime. But there were no gropies around these Skoags, and because they all still had crests, I knew they were new to earth. Skoags usually lost their crests pretty fast in our gravity. One of these Skoags had the tallest crest I'd ever seen, like a king's crown, and purple like a deep old bruise.

There was a mixed crowd around the Skoags. In-lander tourists who'd never seen a Skoag before, taking videos, making tapes. Locals panhandling the tourists, sometimes pretending they were passing the hat for the Skoags. Older boys and a few girls, just hanging out, calling the Skoags dirty names to shock the tourists, making out with a lot of tongue. And a few kids like me, skipping school because the sun was shining and it wasn't too windy and we didn't feel like doing the weekly pee-in-the-bottle thing. The Skoags played for us all.

They'd been playing all morning, the usual Skoag set. They did "Happy Trails to You," and "Horiko Cries," and "When You Were Mine," and then "America the Beautiful." That was the weirdest thing about Skoags, how they'd pick up any music they fancied, and then play it back in any

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order. They'd started "Moon over Bourbon Street" when I saw my Mom coming.

She and Teddy had gone to pick up her aid check that morning. But Teddy wasn't with her, and I knew from her face that another musician had moved out. I was glad, in a selfish way, because for the next few days there'd be regular meals on the table, and more food, because the check would only be feeding us two, and my Mom would talk to me twice as much as usual. Of course, she'd make sure I actually got up and went to school, too, but that wasn't much price to pay. And it wouldn't last long before she'd hold another party and reel in a new musician.

So I was determined to enjoy it while it lasted. So I ran up to her, saying, "Wow, Mom, you should hear this purple-crested one play, he's really something." I said that for about four reasons. First, so she wouldn't have the chance to ask me why I wasn't in school, and second to show that I wasn't going to notice that jerk Teddy was gone because he wasn't worth her time. Third, it cheered her up when I acted like I was interested in music. I think she always hoped I really would be like my father, would grow up to be a singer and redeem her, or justify her life or something. And fourth, because the purple-crested one really was something, though I couldn't have said why.

"You playing tourist, Billy Boy?" my Mom asked me in her teasing way that she used when it was only she and I together again. And I laughed, because it was dumb the way the tourists from inland came down to our part of Seattle to spy on the Skoags and listen to them jam. Anybody who'd lived here ignored them the way you ignore supermarket music or a TV in a store window. All you ever heard from a Skoag was the same thing you'd heard a hundred times before anyway. So what I said was sort of a joke, too, to make her laugh and take the flatness out of her eyes.

But Teddy must have been better than I'd known, because her smile faded, and she didn't scold me or anything. She just stooped down and hugged me like I was all she had in the world. And then she said, very gently, as if I were the adult and she were the little kid explaining something bad she'd done, "I gave him our check, Billy Boy. See, Teddy has a chance to go to Portland and audition for Sound and Fury Records. It's a new label, and if things go like I know they will, he'll be into the big money in no time. And he'll send for us. We'll have a real house, Billy, all to ourselves, or maybe we'll get a motor home and travel across the country with him on tour, see the whole United States."

She said more stuff but I didn't listen. I knew what it meant, because once one of her guys had stolen both checks, her Career Mother Wage and my Child Nutrition Supplement. What it meant was bad times. It meant a month of food bank food, runny peanut butter on dry bread, dry

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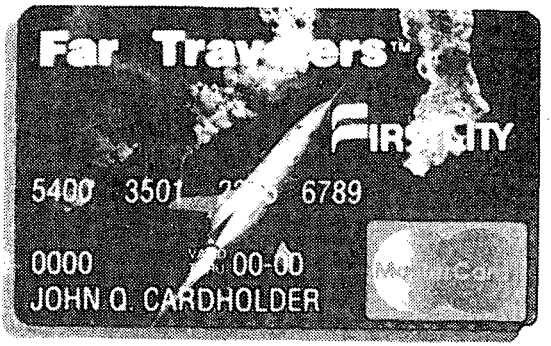
The Shape of Things to Come



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milk made up with more water than you were supposed to use, generic cereal that turned into sog in the milk, and macaroni. Lots and lots of microwaved macaroni, to the point where I used to swallow it whole because I couldn't stand the squidgy feeling of chewing it any more. I was already hungry from being out in the wind all morning, and just thinking about it made me hungrier. There wasn't much food at home; there never was right before the aid check was due.

I just went on holding onto my Mom, hating Teddy, but not much, because if it hadn't been Teddy, it would have been someone else. I wanted to ask, "What about me? What about us? Aren't we just as important as Teddy?" But I didn't. Because it wouldn't bring the money back, so there was no sense in making her cry. The other reason was, about three weeks before, Janice from upstairs had sat at our kitchen table and cried to Mom because she'd just given her little girls away. Because she couldn't take care of them or feed them. Janice had kept saying that at least they'd get decent meals and warm clothes now. I didn't want my Mom to think that I wanted food and clothes more than I wanted to stay with her.

So I wiped my face on her shirt without seeming to, and pulled back to look at her. "It's okay, Mom," I told her. "We'll get by. Let's go home and figure things out."

But she wasn't even listening to me. She was focused on the Skoags, actually on the one with the big crest, listening to "Moon over Bourbon Street" like she'd never heard it before. It sounded the same as always to me, and I tugged at her hand. But it was just like I wasn't there, like she had gone off somewhere. So I just stood there and waited.

My Mom listened until they were done. The big purple-crested Skoag watched her listen to them. His big flat eye-spots were pointed toward her all the time, calm and dead and unfocused like all Skoag eyes are. He was looking over the heads of the tourists and hecklers, straight at her.

When the song was finished, they didn't go right into another song like usual. Purple stood there, watching my mother, and letting the air leak out of his puffers. The other Skoags looked at him, and they seemed puzzled, shifting around and one made a flat squawk. But then they let their air out, too, and pretty soon they were all empty and bony, their puffer things tight against their bodies again. My Mom kept staring at the Skoag, like she was still hearing music, until I shook her arm.

"I'm coming," she said, but she didn't. She didn't even move, until I shook her arm again and said, "I'm hungry."

Then she jerked, and looked down at me finally. "Oh, my poor little kid," she said. She really meant it. That bothered me. I thought about it while we walked home. I wasn't any more selfish than any kid is, and

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kids have a right to be selfish sometimes. So I walked along, thinking that she really did know how awful this month was going to be, and how much I hated squidgy macaroni, and she probably even knew that the sole was coming off my sneaker. But she'd still given the check to Teddy. And that was a hard thing for a kid to understand.

So we went home. Mom switched on the stereo and went right to work. She was real methodical and practical when there wasn't a musician to distract her. She sorted out what groceries we had and organized them in the cupboard. Then she went through all the pockets of her clothes, and dug inside the chair and got together all the money we had. It was ten seventy-eight. Then she sat me at the table with her, like I was one of her musicians, and told me how she was going to get us through the month. She explained that if I went to school every day, I'd get the free morning milk and vita-roll, and free hot lunch on my aid ticket. So I'd be mostly okay, even if there wasn't much for dinner. We'd get through just fine. After all, we were pretty tough, weren't we? And couldn't the two of us beat anything if we just stuck together? And were we going to let a month of crummy groceries knock down tough guys like us? All that stuff. But suddenly, in the middle of the pep talk, she got up and knelt by her stereo. She twiddled the knobs, frowning. "Signal's drifting, or something. Damn, that's all I need. For this to drop dead on me now." She tried about three different stations, then snapped it off. "Lousy speakers," she complained to me. "Everything sounds tinny."

It had sounded okay to me, but I didn't say anything. Instead, I sat still and watched her take out a pot and run water and take things from the cupboards for dinner.

We had oatmeal for dinner, and toast with peanut butter melting on it. Mom gave me the last of the brown sugar for my oatmeal. "Good grains and protein in this meal," Mom said wisely, as if she had planned it rather than scraped together what we had left. I nodded and ate it. It wasn't so bad. At least it wasn't macaroni.

That evening Mom sat at the table, reading a paperback that Teddy had left and wearing his old sweatshirt. I guess she felt pretty bad. Every so often, she'd turn on the stereo and fool with it for a while, then shake her head and snap it off. She'd read a little longer, and then she'd get up and turn the stereo on again, searching through the stations, but never finding what she wanted. In between, I was listening to the building sounds, spooky at night. The water heater in the utility room was growling and gurgling through the wall. I was coloring a "Don't Do Drugs" handout from school, wishing they'd given me more than three crayons. I wanted to color the spoon and syringe silver. Yellow just wasn't the same.

Mom had just snapped the radio off for about the twelfth time. In the

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quiet I heard a sound like someone dragging a bag of potatoes down our steps. Mom and I looked at each other. She lifted her finger to her lips and said, "Shush!" So I sat perfectly still, waiting. There came a slapping sound against the door, and whatever was slapping pushed against it, too. The door thudded against the catch.

My Mom's dark eyes went huge, scaring me more than the noises outside the door. She went to the kitchen and got our biggest knife. "Go to my room, Billy Boy," she whispered. But I was too scared to move. Like a monster movie, when the music screams and you know they're going to show you something awful, but you can't look away. I had to know what was outside. And Mom was too scared to make me obey. Instead she crept a little closer to the door, holding the knife tight. "Who's out there?" she yelled, but her voice cracked.

The pressure on the door stopped, and for a moment all was silent. Then there was a sound, sort of like a harmonica wedged in a trumpet, and someone blowing through it anyway. It was a silly cartoon sound, Doofus Duck smacked with a rubber mallet, and my mother looked so startled that I burst out laughing. It was a dorko noise. Nothing scary could make a sound like that. Then a voice spoke, a low, low voice, like cello strings being rubbed slowly.

"That is my name on my world. But Humans call me Lavender."

"The Skoag?" Mom asked, but I was already past her and undoing the flimsy deadbolt on the door. I had to see it. It was so impossible for a Skoag to be outside our door at night that I had to see it was real. "Billy!" Mom warned, but I dragged the door open anyway.

The Skoag was there. The same purple-crested one we had listened to earlier. Only he looked a lot smaller with all his bladders deflated, not much bigger than my Mom. He was wearing a sort of pouch thing on his front, and in it was a brown grocery sack, a bouquet of flowers wrapped in green tissue paper, and a skinny brown liquor store bag. He was draped in the transparent plastic robe Skoags were supposed to wear in Human dwellings. His skin glistened through it in the watery street-lamp light like oil on a puddle, iridescent and shifting. His fat little flippers waved up and down slowly, like a fish underwater. His murky blue eye spots fixed on my mother.

She stared back at him. She still had the knife in her hand, but she had forgotten it. She crossed her arms, a closing, denying gesture. "What do you want?" she demanded, in the scared stubborn voice she kept for the landlord.

A little bladder above his eyes pulsed with his cello voice. "To come in."

"Well, you can't," she said, at the same time as I asked, "How did you get down the steps?"

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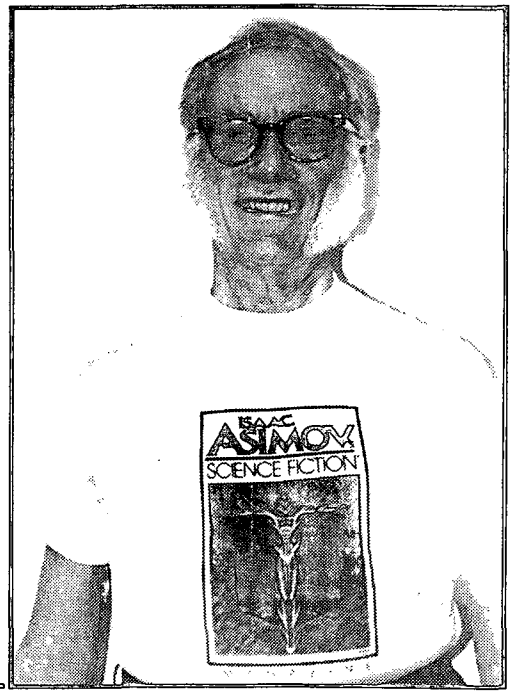

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"With great difficulty," he pulsed at me, but there was a violin squibble above the cello that made his answer a sort of joke. I grinned at him, I couldn't help it. He'd noticed me. He'd answered my question before he paid attention to what my Mom had said, and he'd answered it in the way one buddy might kid with another. I felt two feet taller.

He looked back at my Mom, waiting.

"Go away," she told him.

"I cannot," he said, all cello again. "Earlier today, I heard you listening to us. I think. My companions tell me it was not so, that I am tricking myself because I want too badly. But I am not deceived. I have hope only. I have brought gifts. Flowers and wine for you, as is fitting, and food for your child, who said he was hungry. May I come in?"

She just stood there, staring at him. A car shushed by in the rainy street outside, and the wind gusted, blowing cold air down our steps and in past the Skoag. And still they both just stood there, waiting for something.

"I love you," the cello thrummed and the sound swelled like a big warm wave washing through our apartment. The sound didn't end with the words, it went on with music, like embroidery on the edges of the thought. I listened to it pass and fade, and then the silence came behind it, separating us again. The silence seemed unbearable.

"Come in," said my mother.

So Lavender came to live with us.

Everything changed.

Everything.

Within just a few days, the neighbors stopped knowing us. I'd walk down the streets, and rocks would bounce around me, but I'd never see who'd thrown them. The radio was never turned on again. There was real food, every day. Mom stopped looking at street musicians and haunting the open mikes. The street people called her ugly names, and our mailbox got ripped off the wall in the upstairs lobby. I got into so many fights at school that the principal said I had to stay in at recesses for the rest of the year. After that, I was left totally alone. I didn't care. Because I had Lavender at home.

Every day I went to school, because Lavender said I should. It would be important, later, he assured me, and that was enough for me. Everyday I came home and slid down the ridged ramp that had replaced our steps. And Lavender was always waiting for me to come home, even if my mother wasn't there. Always before, Mom's musicians had tolerated and ignored me, treated me like a cat or a houseplant, a semi-annoying creature that lived in my mother's house. Not Lavender. He knew I was there, and he was glad. He made me important. We would have a snack together, he rubbing his sludgy porridge through a membrane on his

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chest, me munching cookies and milk. Then I had to show him every single paper I'd brought home, read aloud from every library book I'd checked out. All I did amazed him. But mostly we'd talk and laugh. His laugh reminded me of a giant grasshopper chirring. Once he told me that Skoags had never laughed before they came to Earth, but the idea of a special sound made just to show happiness was so wonderful that now it was the first thing that all exiles were allowed to do. Each Skoag got to make up his own kind of laugh. He said it like it was some big favor for them. Then he told me that my laugh was one of the best ones he'd ever heard. That first day, when he'd heard my laugh in the street, he'd known that anyone who could create so marvelous a sound had to be very special indeed. And then he laughed my own laugh for me to hear, and that set me laughing, and we laughed together for about ten minutes, in harmony, like a new kind of song.

Looking back, I know he didn't understand much of basic human needs. Because he learned mostly from me, he had a seven-year-old boy's idea of what was important. Food he understood, and he always made sure there was plenty of it, though he tended to buy the same kinds over and over again. He loved bright, simple toys that moved, yo-yos and tops and plastic gliders, marbles and super balls and frisbees. I'm convinced he thought that flowers were essential to my mother, and he filled our little apartment with graceful glass vases full of them. I never thought to ask for anything more than what he brought and I know my mother never did. She was too used to giving to learn taking easily. Still, Lavender tried to provide for us. I remember the day I came home and found him cautiously touching his flippers to the protruding nails and scabs of sheetrock on the two-by-four wall studs. "This pleases the Mom?" he asked me.

"No. It's really ugly. But it's all we've got," I told him. A wrinkling ran over his deflated bladders, a gesture I had learned was like an excited grin. "This would please the Mom?" the cello thrummed, and he began pulling yards and yards of stuff out of his belly pouch. Shiny like plastic, but soft like fabric, and so thin you could crumple a square yard of it up in your fist. He began fastening it to the wall, in graceful drapery, and as it fell straight, the room warmed with both color and heat, the musky basement smell faded, and a gentle light suffused the room. Then we hid in the closet until my Mom came home and was surprised by it. "Oh, Lavender, you cover up all the rough edges of my life," Mom told him. For a long time, I thought she meant the wall studs. He could make the hanging different colors, and he adjusted it almost daily, though I never asked how. If I had, he would have told me. I just didn't ask.

He told me anything I wanted to know. I knew more about Skoags than any of the "experts" of that time. Anything I asked him, he an-

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swered. I knew that they had been exiled to our world because they sang in public, and that was not permitted on their home world. I knew that they sang only other people's music, because making up new music was something only a holy leader could do. The earth Skoags were religious rebels, sort of like the Pilgrims. They believed singing was so worshipful that Skoags should do it all the time, everywhere, and that everyone should do it, not just priest-Skoags. On their own world, that was heresy, and anyone caught at it had to choose between exile or "a most unfortunate happening." For a long time I didn't know what he meant by that. A lot of what he told me was puzzling. Lavender kept trying to explain to me that singing was a circle, and that if one sang well enough to make the perfect music, would create the one that would close the circle. My Mom, he said, was "Close. Almost the end of the circle. The one, but not quite." I never understood what he meant, but it was very important to him. A day didn't pass without him trying to make me understand. There just weren't human words for the Skoag ideas. It worried him very much. It was the only hole in our communication. He told me other stuff, like how some Skoags had long, articulated flippers like my fingers, and how they were dehydrated for their space journeys, and how they thought of Humans as "half-sexed" because we weren't self-fertile. Anything I asked, he answered. But if I didn't ask, he didn't bother me with it. I never asked him if he had come to end his people's exile, or if he were a very important Skoag on his world or how their spaceships operated. Or he would have told me. But I didn't ask.

In the long evenings, Lavender made music for us, playing anything we wanted. He knew every song my mother ever asked for, and could do them in any artist's style. She would sit on the end of my couch, my feet warm against her, listening raptly while Lavender played until I fell asleep. Mornings I would waken to his slaps on the door and run to let him in. He'd be laden with cereal and milk and fruit and a packet of his own gruelly food, and always fresh flowers for my Mom. He'd play back to me all the new sounds he'd heard in the night city, not just the music that drifted out from the bars, but sea-gulls crying over the bay, and the coughing of winos and the barking of dogs. It was always hard to go to school. I was sure they had fun without me all day at home, but to please Lavender, I went.

Life was good. There was food and talk and warmth at home and that's all most kids ask. But on top of all that, I had Lavender. The value of that is too great to tell. For over a year, the world was as good as it could possibly be.

One day my mother touched him. By accident. I know, because I was there when it happened. So simple, so stupid. She slipped on the kitchen floor, reached out to steady herself and caught Lavender's flipper. Lav-

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ender's bare flipper tip, shining with Skoag slime, caught my mother's hand, steadied her, and transported her to ecstasy. Her face changed, she cried out, a simple "oh" like a kid seeing his first Christmas tree, and sat down on the kitchen floor. She just sat and smiled. Lavender gently pulled his flipper free of her grip, but it was too late. His dark blue eye spots fastened on me.

"You didn't do it on purpose," I told him. "It wasn't your fault." But my heart was shaking my whole body.

A scant second later, my Mom was standing up, saying, "I'm all right. Don't be upset, Lavender. Stop flapping like that. Billy, don't stare, I'm fine." She caught at the edge of the kitchen table, sat down in one of the chairs. "Shit. What a rush!" she said a moment later, and then sighed. And got up from the table and went to the stove and started stirring the spaghetti sauce again. And that was that. "Whew," I thought as my mind darted to my *Don't Do Drugs* book at school. "I'm glad Mom didn't turn into a Skoag gropie."

But, of course, she did.

At first she never touched Lavender when I was around. And kids don't notice gradual changes. I'd get home from school, and she'd be sitting at the table, humming to herself. It got harder to get her attention. More and more, she told me to fix my own supper. At first she'd tell me what to cook, but later she'd just wave at the fridge. After a while, Lavender learned about frozen dinners and bought them for us. One day when I got home, I found that Lavender had replaced our little aid-issued microwave cooker with a more elaborate one. I cooked all the meals from then on. But even then, I didn't catch on.

If I suspected anything, it was only that Mom and Lavender were growing closer. That first night he had said he loved her. That had never seemed strange to me. I loved my Mom, a lot of musicians had said they loved her, so why shouldn't a strange Skoag standing on the doorstep say it? I never doubted it was true, and I don't think Mom did either. Lavender never missed a chance to show how important "the Mom" was. Not just the flowers, or the way he played whatever she wanted him to play. It was the way he respected her in a way no one else ever had. He made her listening as important as his playing.

And it started being more and more important. Now when he played for her at night, he'd stop, sometimes in the middle of the music, and say, "Is that it? Is that right?"

"No," she'd say, and he'd deflate with despair.

Or, "Almost," she'd say, and hum a bit to herself, a swatch of music nothing like what he'd been playing, but he'd say, "I think I hear," and try again.

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And if she said, "Yes, yes, that's it," he'd play the piece over and over again, while she sat and nodded and smiled.

Slowly she changed. She didn't care about her clothes anymore, and seldom went outside. She got fat, and bought big men's shirts from the secondhand store to cover her belly. She became fussy about her hair, brushing and combing it like a fussy fiddler tuning his strings. Her voice changed, becoming dreamy and muffled, the ends of her words blurring. Sometimes when I got home from school, she'd be sitting at the table, dreaming with her eyes open. I'd talk to her but get no response until Lavender came to stand beside her. Then she'd focus on me, and answer my questions in a sweet dreamy voice.

It was easier to talk to Lavender instead. He always knew everything anyway, and Mom was so happy and dreamy that I didn't worry about anything being wrong. She wasn't like the filthy, skinny Skoag gropies in the school book. She was clean, and shining with health and dreams, plump and pretty. About then I found out Lavender didn't always leave at night anymore, but sometimes lay on the bed beside her, with Mom gripping his flipper all night, her head pillowed on his plastic coated body. So I should have known she was a Skoag gropie, right, and realized she was stone deaf? How could I? I was a kid, she didn't look like a gropie, and even if she ignored me a lot, she was still my Mom. And she still listened every night to Lavender's playing.

Even I was enchanted by his music. Mom no longer asked for stuff by titles, and I had never cared what he played. What had mattered to me was that he was playing for me as well as for Mom. That last bit of special attention at the end of the day was what mattered to me. But slowly that changed, as the music he played changed. He started playing a lot of stuff I didn't know. Some of it was dreary and mournful, and sometimes the words were in a different language. Sometimes it was full of strings and campfires, and sometimes it sounded like brass challenges and steel replies. But sometimes the music was so strange and wonderful it made the hair stand up on my arms and legs and tickled the back of my neck. I began to understand how my mother could live for music. Some of the music he played made my heart want to dance outside my body, pulled me from my sofa to sit beside Lavender's fat calloused feet-flippers, hypnotized me with joy. And some of it made me cry, isolated stinging tears because I could almost, but not quite, tell what the music was about.

That had to be Lavender's music. No one else could have made up such music, music that knew me so well. It had to be his original music. But Skoags weren't allowed to make their own music. Unless they were priest-Skoags, composing for the temples.

In February the first package came for Lavender. It was at the bottom

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of the ramp when I got home, and I picked it up and took it into the house. Just a little flat black plastic box. "Look what I found," I said as I came in the door, and Lavender came immediately and took it from me.

"For me," he told me. "A message." His cello strings quivered unnaturally as he slipped it into his pouch. I never saw him open it, and he didn't speak of it again, just asked to see my school papers.

There were three more after that, or perhaps four. Always at the bottom of the ramp when I got home from school, and always Lavender took them. One day it started raining on my way home and when I got to our house, there were flipper prints outlined on the ramp, leading to the flat black box. So Skoags left them. I wondered why the Skoags were sending him messages instead of just talking to him.

The last message box was silver, not black. Lavender held it for a long time, just looking at it. Then the muscles around his eye spots moved and he looked at my Mom for a long time. She knew something about those message boxes, and it wasn't good. I wanted terribly to know what it was, but I was too frightened to ask. Silence wrapped me so tightly it cut into me like wires. I went to my Mom, and she held me against her fat stomach and stroked my head like I was a baby. Then she gave me a gentle push and pointed to the door. I was to go outside.

"I'm not a baby anymore," I said angrily, knowing I was being shut off from something.

"No," said Lavender. He moved a slow flipper, and my Mom let go of me. "You certainly aren't. You are old enough to be trusted with important things." He paused, then the cello thrummed rapidly. "Billy Boy. I have made the other Skoags very angry by being here with you. They demand I come back to them and live as they wish me to live. I cannot. Tomorrow I will go to tell them that. There may be . . ." the cello sighed wordlessly, then went on, "a great unpleasantness for me. A most unfortunate happening, perhaps. Until I come back, I will rely on you to take care of the Mom." He turned slowly until he faced my Mom again. "That is all there is to say. Billy does not need to leave." She bowed her head, accepting his wishes. He spoke no more about it, but went about the apartment tunelessly humming and adjusting the wall hanging from pale mauve to a sky blue.

That evening he played long, wordless songs with lots of strings and high pitched wind instruments. I fell asleep to music like sea gulls crying after a storm.

The next day when I got home from school, Lavender wasn't there. My Mom was sitting at the table. She didn't even look up until I slapped my school books down in front of her. Then she looked up with eyes as flat and dark as Lavender's eye spots. Her face was like the day she'd given

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I pulled back, feeling betrayed, knowing something was terribly, terribly wrong. "Lavender!" I cried, but no cello sawed an answer. I looked again at my Mom, at her scarred hands and her deaf loneliness. I saw what he had done, but his not being here, now, was worse.

"Don't hate him," Mom said, in her slow, sticky voice. "We had to do it, Billy. We couldn't help ourselves. And someday it's going to be all right."

She couldn't have known how bad it was going to get. All that long empty evening, she'd shiver suddenly and then wrap her arms around herself and cock her head as if seeking for a sound. I sat on the couch and watched her and tried to imagine her loneliness. My mother cut off from music, from all sound. As kind to seal off her lungs from air. But he loved her, he loved me, he couldn't leave her empty like that and me alone, he wouldn't just go away. I watched her digging her fingers into her ears like she was trying to claw out a stopper. Her nails came out with tiny shreds of dry skin and scabby stuff. She wiped at her ears with pieces of toilet paper, and they came away pink. It was awful to watch. But the worst was the sound of flippers on the ramp, and the heavy slap at the door. The worst was me jumping up, believing that Lavender had come back and everything was going to be all right. I ran to the door and dragged it open for him, and he fell halfway into the room.

It was a terribly clattery sound, his fall, but he didn't cry out. My Mom didn't make a sound as she went to him. I stood clear of them both, watched her roll him over.

I screamed when I saw what they had done to him. The remains of his bladders fluttered in feeble rags and a pale yellowish stuff oozed from the torn edges. They had slashed them all, every sound membrane on his body. He tried to speak, but made only a ridiculous sound of flapping curtains and newspapers blowing down the street, a terrible fluttering of ripped drumheads. My mother knelt over him and lifted his flippers and pressed them to her cheeks. Even now, I don't believe it was the act of a junkie trying for one last rush. There was terrible wisdom and love in her eyes as his shining iridescence ate into her skin and marked her. His tattered membranes fluttered once more and then hung still.

I ran out of the apartment and down the streets. They were shiny with rain, shining like his skin, and wet like the dripping stuff from his wounds. I ran as far and fast as I could, trying to run away from those terrible moments to a place where it hadn't happened. I don't know who

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called the police or the ambulance or whoever it was that came and took the body away. I know it wasn't my Mom. She would have sat there forever, just holding his flippers while his music faded.

I came back in the grey part of morning. A man and a woman were waiting for me. They wore long overcoats and stood, as if sitting in our chairs might make them dirty. An outline was chalked on the floor, and they wouldn't answer any of my questions. Instead, they asked me questions, lots of them. Had the Skoags killed Lavender? Why? Did I see them do it? Did my Mom help them do it? Why had a Skoag been living with us? Had he ever tried to touch me? But the anger inside me wouldn't let me answer their questions. "Where's my Mom?" I demanded each time, and finally they put me in a car and took me to the Children's Home and left me there.

The women at the Children's Home all wore grey pants and white shirts. They all called me "honey." They gave me two pants, two shirts, underwear, socks and shoes and a bath. They threw away all my own stuff. Then they showed me a bed with a brown blanket on it in a row of beds with brown blankets, and told me the bed and the box at the foot of it were mine.

The next day, more people came to talk to me. Nice people, with kind voices and gum and Lifesavers. A lady told me my Mommy was sick, but was in a place where she'd get better soon. But she said it like really my Mom was very bad, and had to stay somewhere until she was good again. They told me the Skoag was gone and I didn't have to be afraid anymore. I could tell about it and no one would hurt me. They told me the best way to help my Mom was to answer all of their questions. But their voices sounded like creaking cage doors and iron gates swinging in the wind. I knew that talking to them wouldn't help my Mom. So when they asked me questions, I always said I didn't know, or answered the opposite of what was true. I contradicted myself on purpose. I said Lavender was my father. I said my Mom was his secretary. I said I was going to throw up. Then I did, trying to make it hit their shoes. After three days they left me alone.

After that I had to go to school classes each day with the other Home-kids and special anti-substance abuse classes for the kids of junkies. I got beat up nearly every day. The bigger kids called me "Billy Bun, the Skoag fucker's son." One of the kids had a checkstand newspaper with a picture of my Mom on the front and big black print that said, "SKOAG'S LOVE SLAVE WITNESSES RITUAL EXECUTION!!! Gropie confesses, 'They killed him for loving me!' " I hit that kid and grabbed the paper and tore it up, and the playground lady said I was an animal not fit to associate with other children. I had to stay in for three recesses. Which was fine with me. That night I got out of bed and went down to that kid's

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bunk and pissed on the foot of it. So he got in trouble for wetting his bed. I learned fast.

A very long time went by. Probably it was only a month or two, but it seemed forever. My real life had ended, and someone had stuck me in this new one. I felt like I was someone else, that both Lavender's life and Lavender's death had happened to someone I knew, some dumb little kid who hadn't seen his Mom was a junkie and his friend was her pusher. I'd never be that stupid again. The counselor told me that I must always remember that none of it was my fault. I was only a child, and I couldn't have done a thing about my mother's decision to become a Skoag gropie. They worked real hard at taking away my guilt and replacing it with bitterness toward my Mom, who had ruined my life. But then a spring day came, and I looked out the classroom window and saw a lady with a coat and hood and gloves and a scarf wrapped around her face. I didn't recognize her, so I just went back to arithmetic. At recess they let her take me home.

Things are simple when you're a kid. So simple and so awful. I accepted what happened and the aftermath, just kept on day after day, and nothing surprised me because I never knew what to expect. So I wasn't shocked to find that our door had been busted in, and someone, our neighbors or the street kids, had trashed the place. The smeared chalk outline was still on the floor, with piles of human shit all over it. Lavender's wall hangings were dead brown tatters, and his flowers were a moldering mess of brown stems and petals and broken glass on the table. The cupboard doors had been ripped down, the microwave was gone, and my couch smelled like urine. Food had been thrown around and mouse droppings were everywhere.

Mom picked up a kitchen chair and set it on its feet and brushed off the seat. She took off her coat and scarf and gloves and put them on the chair, baring her scars so matter-of-factly that they didn't shock me. They were part of her now, like her fat belly and dark eyes. She picked up a scrap of paper off the floor and wrote down a list of cleaning supplies and cheap food and gave me some money. Then she picked up our old broom.

No one bothered me on the way to the store. The check-out man stared at me for about two minutes before he rang up the stuff. Coming home, I passed a Skoag on the street, a big fat one, and he turned and started following me. But all Skoags are slow, and I ignored the way he tooted for me to come back, he wanted to be my friend, he had candy for me. I just hurried, going through alleys until I lost him.

I got home, and the place looked almost normal. Most of the mess had been scraped into brown sacks for me to shuttle out to the dumpster. The chalk lines were gone, and as if that was some kind of undoing magic,

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I half expected to see Lavender come out of the bedroom, or to hear his cello thrumming. Instead there was silence, and the crisp brown tatters of his wall hangings dangled over the edges of a garbage sack.

I stood there and the silence filled me up, made me as deaf and isolated as my mother. Welling up with the silence came the sudden grief of knowing he was really dead. I sat down on the floor and started crying and calling out, "Lavender, Lavender!" My Mom kept right on trying to put the cupboard doors back on, using a table knife for a screwdriver, and I kicked my feet and slapped my hands on the hard cold cement and screamed until someone upstairs started pounding on the floor with a broom handle. I guess Mom felt the vibrations. She came and held me until I stopped crying, and said I was okay. But I wasn't. I knew just how alone I really was. My pain was like an invisible knife stuck in me that no one could see to pull out. I knew my mother was hurt just as badly, and there was nothing I could do to help her, either. That was when I decided to forgive her for the awful thing she had done to me, for making Lavender go away.

We found a rhythm in our days, a steady beat that kept us living. Mom became a very good housekeeper, mostly to fill her time. Everything was cleaned up and she pieced back together the broken stuff. She saved from each aid check until we could buy an economy microwave and have hot foods again. She mended all my clothes, and sewed things from my outgrown stuff. Every two weeks she'd put on her gloves and scarf and go after her aid check, but I did all the shopping. I went back to school. I got beat up every day on the playground. Then I stole a baseball bat from school and laid for the kid that had done it and really worked him over. The third time a kid beat me up, and then got bushwhacked, the other kids made the connection. They left me alone. They knew they could hit me at school, but sooner or later the price for doing it was higher than anyone wanted to pay. So I got by. I'd still see the fat Skoag outside the grocery store, and he'd call to me, but I outran him. So no one bothered me. The silence of my home spread out and wrapped me up. No one talked to me much, and that seemed fitting. What better way to mourn Lavender's passing than with silence? I was nine years old, and the best part of my life was over.

Mom got fatter and slower. I thought she was going to die. She moved like an old, old woman, and sat like she was blind as well as deaf. Once a week an aid lady came, with pamphlets about how not to be a Skoag gropie, and Don't Do Drugs coloring books and balloons and crayons for me. She'd give Mom a signed slip, and Mom had to turn it in to get her aid check. The aid lady was younger than Mom and wore grey pants and a white shirt. I secretly believed she was from the Children's Home and might take me back there. She always made me show her my hands, and

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every week I had to pee in a bottle for her, even though everyone knows that Skoag slime won't show in a pee test. She left signing booklets for my Mom, but she didn't want them. So I took them and learned to sign dirty words to the kids at school.

And Lavender was never there.

That's how it would hit me, I'd be going along, doing a math page or signing out something about someone's sister or folding up my blanket or getting a drink of water, and suddenly I'd notice, all over again, that Lavender wasn't there. It always felt like someone had suddenly grabbed hold of my heart and squeezed it. I looked all through the house one day, trying to find one thing that he had touched, one thing he'd given to us that we still had. But there was nothing. It was like he'd never existed, and the silence was like he'd never made music.

One May day I came home from school and Mom had a baby. She hadn't warned me, so it was a big shock to find her lying in bed with this little pink thing dressed in a nightgown made from one of my old T-shirts. I knew someone had helped her from the neatly folded towels by the bed, and the grey box of paper diapers. More aid stuff. My Mom's fat stomach was gone, and I felt really dumb for not knowing she had been pregnant. I saw pregnant women in the streets all the time, but it had never occurred to me that my Mom could get that way. I knew, too, that she couldn't get a baby unless she'd done it with somebody. And the only one who'd been living with us . . .

Mom wasn't saying much, just watching me as I looked at the baby. What fascinated me the most was those tiny little fingernails she had, thin as paper. I kept staring at her hands.

"Go ahead," Mom finally said. "You can touch her. She's your little sister, Billy. Put your finger in her hand." Her voice dragged like an old tape, and she sounded really tired.

"Is it . . . safe?" I asked. But she wasn't watching my mouth, so she didn't know I'd said anything. I went and got my school tablet. On it I printed, very carefully, "IS SHE PART SKOAG ON HER SKIN?" Then I took it back into Mom's bedroom and handed it to her.

She read it and crumpled it up and threw it across the room. Her mouth went so tight it was white around her lips. It scared me. She'd never been mad at me while Lavender was around, and since he'd died, she'd been too beaten to be angry at anything. "Shit!" she said, and the word came out with hard edges, sounding like she used to. She grabbed my wrist, and I could feel the hard slickness of her Skoag scarred palms. "You listen to me, Billy Boy," she said fiercely. "I know what you been hearing. But you knew Lavender, and you damn well know me. And you should know that we . . . that we loved each other. And if he'd been a human and we could have had a baby together, we'd have done it. But

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he wasn't, and we didn't. This baby here, she's all mine. One hundred percent. It sometimes happens to women who get hooked on Skoag touch. They call it a self-induced pregnancy. This baby's a clone of me. You understand that? She's the same as me, all over again. Only I'm going to make sure she comes out right. She's going to be loved, she's going to have chances. She's not going to end up in a dump on aid, with no . . ."

Her voice got more and more runny, the words souping together. She let go of my wrist, and started crying. She lifted her hands and curled her fingers toward the tight skin on her palms, and held them near her face but not touching it. Her tears trickled into the flipper scars that her final touching of Lavender had left on her face. Her crying woke the baby up, and she started crying, too. Her little face got red and her mouth gaped open, but no sound came out. Then my Mom said to her, in the most terrible voice I've ever heard, "Baby, what'd you come here for? I got nothing to give you. I got nothing to give anyone." And she rolled over and turned her back on her.

I stood there, watching them, thinking that any minute Mom would turn back and pick her up and take care of her. But a long time passed, and Mom just lay there, crying all shaky, and the baby lay there, all red and crying without sound.

So I picked her up. I knew how, I used to hold Janice's baby before she gave her kids away. I held her against my chest, with her head on my shoulder so it wouldn't wobble. I carried her around and rocked her, but her face stayed red and she kept breathing out through her mouth, really hard. She didn't make any sound when she cried, but I thought maybe newborn babies didn't cry out loud. I thought she might be hungry. So I went in the kitchen and I checked the refrigerator, to see if Mom had bottles and government aid formula in plastic envelopes like Janice used to have. And there was, so I warmed one up in the microwave until the plastic button on it turned blue to show it was the right temperature. Then I sat down and put the bottle in her wide open mouth. But she acted like she didn't even know it was there, and kept up her unbearable screaming.

I sat down on the couch with her on my lap. Her little legs were curled up against her belly. I looked at her red wrinkly feet and her teeny toes. My old T-shirt looked dopey on her, and I wished I had something better for her to wear. Maybe she was cold. So I pulled a corner of my blanket up over her. Her mouth stayed open and her face stayed red. I really wished I had a suck-on thing to stick in her mouth. But I didn't. So I started rocking her on my lap, and singing this song Janice used to sing to baby Peggy, about a mockingbird and a ponycart and all sorts of presents the baby would get if she'd be quiet. And right away she closed her mouth, and went back to being pink instead of red. She opened her

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eyes that she'd squinched shut and looked right at me. Her eyes were kind of a murky blue. I looked into them and I knew Mom had lied. Because she looked at me just the way Lavender used to, when I didn't know if he was looking at my face or at something inside my head. I knew she was his, and as long as I had her, he wasn't really gone. This baby was something he'd touched, something he'd left for me to hold onto and keep. Part of him for me to keep.

I suddenly felt shaky and my throat closed up so tight I couldn't breathe or sing, but she didn't seem to mind now. She just kept looking up at me and I kept looking at her, and I wondered if this was what Lavender had meant about closing a circle. Because I knew she was loving me as much as I loved her. It was as important as he had said it was. I held her until her eyes closed, and then I carefully lay down on the couch with her on my stomach and my blanket over us. Her face was against my neck, breathing, and every now and then her mouth would move in a wet baby kiss. Before I fell asleep, I named her Lisa, from an old song Lavender used to sing about Lisa, Lisa, sad Lisa, Lisa.

After that, she was more my baby than Mom's. Coming home to her was like coming home to Lavender. I meant that much to her. She was always crying and wet when I got home. Mom never seemed to notice when she needed changing, and even if she hadn't been deaf, she wouldn't have heard this baby cry. So I'd clean her up and feed her and hold her and rock her. And I'd sing to her. She liked that the best. She was just like my Mom that way. I got the idea of tuning the stereo to an all-music station and leaving it on for her when I had to go to school in the morning. Since our place had been trashed, the stereo always had a background sound like cars going by in a wet street, but Lisa didn't care. I'd put her down in the morning and turn on the stereo for her, and she'd still be happy when I got home from school. She slept with me at night, since I was afraid she'd fall out of Mom's bed. But my couch was perfect, because I could put her between me and the back of it, and she'd be safe all night long, just as safe as the little mice nesting inside it.

A new pattern came into my life. I was taking care of things, taking care of the Mom, just like Lavender had told me, and taking care of him, in the form of Lisa. Mom didn't have to do much at all. She got her checks, and kept the house clean. I took the checks to the store and got food and sometimes a few extra little things for Lisa. She loved anything that made a noise, rattles, bells, anything. The only time Mom got mad was when I spent seven dollars on a stuffed lamb with a music box inside it. She yelled at me in her mushy voice, because to get it I had to buy tofu instead of hamburger and skipped getting margarine and eggs and jam. But it was worth it to watch Lisa wave her little fists excitedly every time the lamb started playing.

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After four or five months, I noticed Mom wasn't keeping the house as clean. She still swept and stuff, but not like before, and I was doing almost all the cooking. Something had gone out of Mom and left her flat, something more than just a baby coming out of her stomach. I think she had expected more, had thought that Lisa was going to be better somehow. Disappointed was how she acted at first, and then later, disinterested. I felt mad about it, and I'd try to make her pay more attention to Lisa. I'd take her to Mom and show her how Lisa was learning to smile, or how she could sit on her own. But it didn't do any good. Mom would hold her awhile and look at her, and then she'd go set her down on the couch, without even making sure she couldn't roll off. She never talked to Lisa or played with her. And after a while I knew she never would. So I started loving her even more, to make up for Mom not loving her.

It got harder as Lisa got bigger. Summer went okay, but by the time school started again, it wasn't safe for me to leave her all day. I tried putting her in a cardboard box while I was gone, but it was hard to find ones that were strong enough. She'd get hold of the edges and try to stand up, and I was afraid she'd fall. She was eating more, too, so even if I left a bottle inside her box for her, she'd still be really hungry when I got home. Mom didn't notice her at all, and of course she couldn't hear Lisa's silent crying. Mom didn't seem to notice much of anything. She'd tidy up the house each day, and then just sit at the table. Late at night, she might put a scarf around her face and go out for a walk. But that was about all she did, and it didn't make me feel any safer about leaving Lisa all day. So after Christmas I just didn't go back to school and no one ever noticed.

When I think about those days, with Lisa starting to be a real person and all the time we had together, they're almost as good as the days with Lavender. Lisa's eyes turned brown, but they never lost that Lavender look, where she could look right through me while I rocked her to the music. Her hair was dark like Mom's, but curly at the back of her head, and she was almost always smiling. I hated dressing her in stuff made from old T-shirts. The stuff was too small, and Mom hadn't made her any new clothes. So I asked the aid lady who came about once every two months then, and she told me where I could get baby clothes that rich people gave away. She gave me slips for Lisa and me and Mom, and helped me write down the right sizes on them. That aid lady wasn't too bad.

On Monday I took the slips and Lisa and went, using my aid pass to ride the bus. Everyone on the bus thought Lisa was cute, and kept calling her honey and touching her hands or bouncing her feet. She was real good about it. One old lady who sat beside us part of the way gave me a five dollar bill and told me to buy my little sister something with it.

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She was really nice. When she got off the bus, she kept saying, "Bye-bye, sweety. Bye-bye," like she expected Lisa to say something. "She doesn't talk," I told her, and the old lady just smiled and said, "Oh, she will pretty soon. Don't you worry."

It was the same at the clothes place. A lady at the counter kept talking to Lisa, saying, "You such a sweet thing! You such a good girl, aren't you?" Lisa would smile, but never make a sound.

"She's shy, isn't she?" the lady said. "I bet she babbles her head off at home."

"Yes, ma'am," I said, and then felt bad for lying when the other lady came back with three bags of clothes for us. They showed me the stuff they'd picked out for Lisa, little dresses with lace and a new blanket and a chiming rattle that Lisa grabbed right away. Lisa's bag was the fullest of all, probably because she was so cute.

I should have felt good going home. But the bags were heavy and it was hard to carry them and Lisa. There was another baby on the bus, making fussy angry noises. It sounded awful, but I wished Lisa could do that. Her being quiet at home had never worried me, but now I was thinking, she won't always be a baby at home, and what then?

I got off the bus with the heavy bags, and Lisa was wriggly. It was getting dark and starting to rain and I had eight blocks to go. I felt like I couldn't take another step when the fat Skoag bounced out of an alley right in front of us.

"Hello, little boy!" he honked.

"Stuff it up your ass!" I said back, because I was really scared. Even if I dropped all the clothes, I couldn't run with Lisa. In the dark and the rain I might fall on top of her and kill her. I squished her close to me, hoping the Skoag wouldn't see Lavender's eyes, and kept walking. Maybe if I just kept walking, he'd leave us alone. But his flipper feet kept on slapping the wet sidewalk beside us.

"I've got something for you," he said, and I got even scareder, because that was just like the guy in the OKAY TO SAY NO book at school.

"Stuff it up your ass," I said again and walked faster. One of the bags tore, and I wanted to cry. I'd have yelled for help, but it was dark and there was no one on the streets. This close to home, even if I did yell for help, no one would want to come.

"Boy," he tootled softly. "It has been hard to find you, for it was commanded that none should speak of it. Every time I speak to you, I put myself in danger of a most unfortunate occurrence. Please take these and free me of a heavy promise."

Lisa was wriggling in my arms, trying to get a better look at the tootling voice. She kicked out and one of my bags went flying. Before I could grab it up, he took a package from his pouch and dropped it into

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the bag. Plastic baggies, taped together, but I couldn't tell what was inside them. I stood still and stared through the dark at him. I was scared to pick up the bag because I didn't want to get close to him and I didn't know what he'd put in it. Drugs, maybe, something I'd get arrested for having. But it was the bag with Lisa's clothes in it, the ones I'd gone through all this for.

"What's that?" I demanded, trying to sound tough.

"One for each of your months. Green trading paper, what is the word for it? Money. For you to take care of the Mom."

"Lavender." I said his name, knowing there was a connection but not figuring it out yet.

"Silence!" the fat Skoag honked, and he sounded like a scared Volkswagen. "To speak the name of a blasphemer is to invite a most unfortunate occurrence."

"But . . ."

"My task is done, until your next month begins. Next time I call, do not run away. This task is heavy and I would call back the promise, if I had known what would befall the one who asked. Go away quickly, before I am seen with you."

He waddled off like a frightened duck. I managed to snag up the fallen bag. All the way home, my heart was banging against my lungs. I felt like I'd seen Lavender's ghost, that he was still around somehow, looking out for us. I kept wondering about the money in the bag. Not how much it was, or what I'd use it for, but what Lavender had been thinking when he made the fat Skoag promise. If he'd known he was going to die, why'd he go to the Skoags who killed him, why didn't he go to the police or something, or even just come home and ignore those message boxes?

Somehow I got Lisa and the bags down the ramp and managed to turn the doorknob without dropping anything. When I got inside, there was only one light burning and Mom wasn't there. I didn't know if she'd gone looking for us because it was so late, or just gone out on one of her night walks.

Some things you just have to do first. So I changed Lisa and got her a bottle and put one of the new nightgowns on her and put her in a cardboard box with her bottle, the chiming rattle and the new blanket. She looked so sweet, all done up in new stuff that it was suddenly worth all I'd gone through. I turned the stereo to some soft music and she settled down.

Then there was time to think, but too much to think about. The package in Lisa's bag was money, little rolls of it in plastic baggies. I opened it carefully and threw the bags away, even though the slime on them was dried, and dry Skoag slime isn't dangerous. Each baggie was the same, five ten-dollar bills. I unfolded every single one, looking for a note, or

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some sign from Lavender to help me understand why he had left us and let someone kill him. But there was only money.

I wrapped the money in one of Lisa's old nightgowns and stuffed it down the couch. I wasn't giving it to Mom. Lavender had left it for me, because he knew I would buy the right things with it. I already knew I was going to get Lisa a playpen so she didn't have to crawl on the cold cement anymore. And fresh, real bananas instead of dried banana flakes that always looked like grey goop.

I went over to her box and looked in at her. She looked back at me, her legs curled up on her tummy and helping hold the bottle, one little leak of milk trickling down her cheek. I reached down and wiped it away, but she smiled at my touch and more milk trickled out of the corner of her mouth. Her dark Lavender eyes looked at me and through me, and for a second he was there, like any moment his cello voice would fill the room. But Lisa had no voice.

And that was another thing to think about.

She could hear, that was for sure. So why didn't she make noises like other babies? I took her bottle away and tried to look in her mouth. She sucked on my finger, but when I tried to open her mouth, she got mad. Finally, she opened it herself, in one of her silent screams. I looked in, but if there was anything wrong in there, I couldn't see what it was. I looked until she was all red and sweaty from her soundless crying. Then I gave her the bottle back and rocked her to make up for being mean. And I thought.

Lisa was asleep and I was bedded down beside her, nearly falling off the couch now because she'd grown so much, when Mom came back in. She didn't turn on any lights or say anything, she just came in and went straight to her room, making a little humming sound as she went.

And I lay there on the couch and I knew. I knew what she'd gone out for.

God, I was mad.

I lay there and shook with anger and being scared. Because she was going to blow us all up. I wanted to get up and go into her room and scream at her. But she wouldn't hear me, and if I held up a note, she'd just ignore it. I could go to her and tell her everything, about the money from Lavender and the new clothes and Lisa not being able to talk, and she wouldn't even care. She'd only go on with her idiot humming and staring. Because she didn't care, and probably never had, not about anything except her damn music.

She wasn't stupid. She'd keep the house clean and dress decent and pick up her aid checks. She didn't want to be a Skoag gropie in the streets. She'd sneak out by night, find Skoags standing outside the clubs listening to the music, and touch one. I knew it as plainly as if I'd seen

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it. That was what mattered to her, a press of Skoag flesh. She didn't care that if the aid worker caught her with slimy hands, they'd take Lisa and me to some Children's Home. I remembered what it was like. I could imagine Lisa there, her silent crying going ignored, growing up not able to tell anyone when someone was mean to her. They'd put her with the other ones they called "Special" in a big room with a lot of baby toys and ignore her. I'd never see her and she'd forget about me. I'd lose the only thing Lavender had left me. Because of Mom.

I watched Mom the next day, hoping I was wrong. But the signs were there, in the rhythmic way she swept the floor, her chin nodding to the unheard beat. She was groping Skoag slime. It was such a slutty thing to do. I had thought that her touching Lavender had been because they loved each other. Now she seemed like a whore to me, someone who'd touch any Skoag just to make music in her head. I hated her.

The next day I went out to the secondhand store. I bought Lisa a stroller, a playpen, and a piece of carpet to go in the bottom of it. And one of those suits with the feet and a hood. It took me two trips to get everything home.

When my Mom saw all the stuff, she tried to ask me where it had come from. But I just ignored her and her mashed potato voice. She grabbed hold of my arm and shook me. "Biw-wweee! Wherr aw thisss-tuff frum? Huh?" That's what she sounded like. I grabbed her hand off my arm and turned it over and pried her fingers open. The Skoag scars were shiny, and wet in the cracks. She jerked away from me.

"I don't have to tell you anything," I said as she held her hands to her chest. I didn't yell it. I just said it real clearly, making sure she could see my mouth move. I picked Lisa up and took her to the couch. I started playing pat-a-cake with her, ignoring Mom. After a while, Mom started going, "Huh. Huh-uh-uh! Huh!" She sat down and put her scarred hands over her scarred face and rocked. After a while I realized she was crying. I didn't go to her. I remembered DON'T DO DRUGS at school, and I knew it was true, that junkies don't have friends, don't love, don't care about anything but their next fix. No one can afford to love a junkie. So I did what the books said. I ignored her. And that was the day I was ten years old.

I took control of things. I found the sign language booklets that the aid lady had left, and I started making Lisa sign. Simple stuff at first. Hold up your arms to be picked up. Finger in the mouth for bottle. Nod your head for stereo turned on. It was harder for me than for Lisa. Because I knew what she wanted, but I couldn't give it to her until she signed, no matter how she cried. I'd make the sign and then I'd take her hands and make the sign. But after a while, I had to make her sign

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herself. She cried a lot. But finally, she started doing the simple signs. By the time she was two, we were on the ones in the pamphlet.

Things went okay for a while. Mom was careful about her habit. None of the aid ladies caught on to her. She was always home when they visited, and the place was tidy. Once, I came back from the store and found her giving Lisa a bath in the sink. But it was only because the aid lady was there. It was just a trick to have her hands busy, and if the aid lady saw the wetness in the cracks of her palms, she'd think it was bath water. Lisa was splashing water all over and smiling like it was normal for Mom to take care of her. I set the groceries on the table and said, "Hi Mom," like we were a happy little family. Mom kept on sponging Lisa, and finally the aid lady said she had to go, but she was glad that things were going better for us.

As soon as she left, I got a towel and took my Lisa and dried her carefully. Lisa kept signing for "cookie" while I was drying her and dressing her while she was kicking and wriggling. Mom gave her one and it wasn't until I got her shoes tied and set her on the floor that I realized what that meant. It made me madder than her using Lisa's bath to keep the aid lady from checking her hands. I found the sign booklets on her nightstand. I carried them out and slapped them down on the kitchen table. Mom was watching me.

"These are mine," I told her, making my lip movements plain. "Leave them alone."

"Bwee," she said pleadingly, and I could see how big and purple her tongue was getting inside her mouth. It made me feel sick and sad and sorry, for Lisa and myself, mostly. That big purple tongue was a withdrawal symptom for a Skoag gropie, it meant she'd been down for more than forty-eight hours. I thought about her washing Lisa, keeping her back to the aid lady. Hiding. She'd still been hiding from the aid lady, it was just a different way from the one I'd figured. She was still using us.

She wasn't getting her slime. I didn't know why, but I knew it was dangerous for us. She wouldn't be able to last. Before long, everyone would know. It hit me. I'd have to take care of it. One more thing for me to handle to keep Lisa safe. It made me angry and at the same time, hot and satisfied because I'd been right about her, she was just going to drag us in deeper and make it all harder. I'd been right to stop caring about her, because she was just going to hurt us if we let her be important to us.

Everything was getting harder. They'd tracked me down for school, and now I had to get there an hour earlier for remedial math. Which meant leaving Lisa with Mom for even longer. And Lisa was walking, so if you left the door open she'd head up the ramp and out onto the

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sidewalk. I'd sit in school and wonder if Mom had gone out to finger some Skoags and left the door open and Lisa had toddled out and been hit by a car. Or worse, just wandered off, and I'd go home and call her but she wouldn't be able to answer. . . . My imagining made school hours torture.

I'd race home each day, and each day Lisa would be okay. Every few nights Mom would go out and I didn't know what to hope for. That she'd score some slime and come home hummy, but easy to spot as a gropie? That she wouldn't get any, but then she'd be trying to sign to Lisa and showing off her withdrawal? Maybe that she wouldn't hear a delivery van coming down the alleys?

It all came together one night when I went to get another envelope from the fat Skoag. The street lamp was glinting off his skin, and flashing off his voice membrane each time it swelled like a khaki neon light. He was holding out the envelope in a plastic-mittened flipper, but I said, "I need a favor."

"No," he tooted. "No favors." He flapped the envelope at me frantically. He looked toward the alley mouth, but there was nothing there. I took a breath.

I said calmly, like I was sure of it, "You promised Lavender you'd look out for me and the Mom."

"Yes. I bring you the money, every time."

"Yeah. Well, that's good, but not enough. I need you to come to my house, twice a week, late at night."

"No." He said it fast, scared. Then, "Why?"

"Yes. You know why."

He rocked on his flippers like a zoo elephant. "I can't," he tootled mournfully. "Please. I can't. Take the money and go. Dangerous for me."

"Dangerous for me if you don't. And you promised Lavender."

"I . . . Please. Please. Once a week. Wednesday night, very late. Please."

He shoved the envelope into my hand. I watched him rock. If I demanded it, he'd come twice a week, but he'd hate me. Or he'd come once a week, and think I'd let him off easy. "Okay," I said, settling for the second one. I might need something else someday, and once a week would hold Mom together.

He came late Wednesday. It startled me awake, his flippering down the ramp and then slapping the door. Mom had stayed in, looking at her hands and sighing, and gone to bed around midnight. It was two A.M. when the fat Skoag showed. I'd gone to sleep, thinking he wasn't going to come. Odd. Just the sounds of him coming down the ramp, and me opening the door like I used to for Lavender made my heart pound. Like maybe I'd open the door and somehow it would be Lavender standing there, gently waving his flippers and waiting for me.

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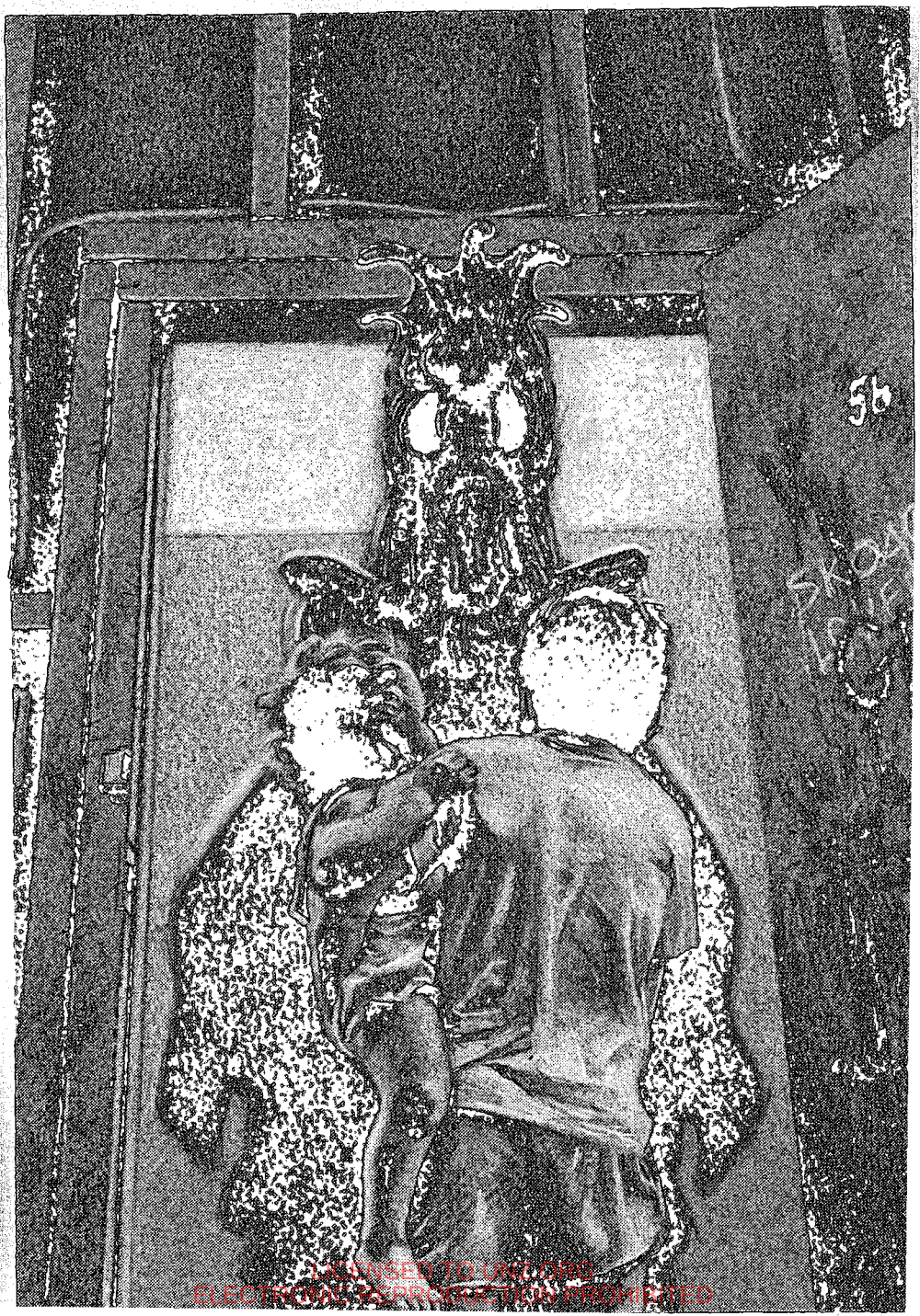

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But it was only the fat Skoag. He was pressed into the darkest corner of the stairwell, staring up at the sidewalk. As soon as I opened the door, he scuttled in and pushed it shut.

"Quickly," he said, pulling off a plastic mitten. "Quickly, please, and then I will go."

"This way," I said, and led him into my mother's bedroom.

She wasn't asleep. She was lying on her back, staring at the ceiling. The bed, wedged in a corner of the small room, was a tousled wreck. Some movement of air as we came into the room turned her eyes to us. She stared at us, between dreaming and awake, and suddenly she sat up and screamed "Lavender!"

The word came out crisp and hard and real, like she used to talk. Then she saw it wasn't him and she broke. She made this horrible laughing-crying sound. The fat Skoag freaked when she screamed and waddled frantically for the door, but I was closer, and I slammed it and put my back to it. "No," I said, gripping the knob. "You don't leave until she's touched you."

His eye spots went flat and dead. He turned and slowly walked toward the bed. Her hysterics trailed away in broken sobs. I watched her face, her shock fading and being replaced by horror as the fat Skoag came closer. "No," she said, clearly, and then, "Nooh. Nooh." She backed up on the bed, pressing into the corner. "Noooh. Doanwanis. Goway. Bwee. Pease. Trynstob. No." But when the Skoag held his flipper out, she suddenly lunged across the bed and gripped it like a handful of free lottery tickets. She held on and her body jerked in little spasms, like the kid at school who had fits. Her eyes went back and she threw her head way back on her neck and her tongue came out. I felt sick and dirty, like I was watching her have sex with someone, or watching a doctor work on guts. But I couldn't look away. The Skoag stood there until her hands slid away. They were thick with his slime, and iridescent in the darkness. The stuff was thick, like the goop she used to rub on my chest when I was little and had a bad cold. She crumpled over onto her side. I pulled the blankets back up over her. As I let the Skoag out, I wondered why I had bothered to do that.

"Remember," I said, as he waddled up the ramp. "Next Wednesday. It's important. And you promised Lavender."

I was thinking that Wednesday was about right, because the aid lady always came on Thursdays or Fridays, and Mom would still look okay when she got here. The fat Skoag paused on the ramp.

"For Lavender," he said, like brass trumpets coming from a far hill. "Only for him would I do this thing. Only for him."

I knew then that the fat Skoag was close to hating me tonight, and that it didn't have to have been that way. If I hadn't demanded this, he

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might have become my friend. I watched the fat Skoag leave and felt pimpish and sly and small for trading on his loyalty to Lavender. But I had to, to keep Lisa safe. Sometimes the only thing I was sure of was that Lavender had entrusted Lisa to me. I went back to bed, curling up around Lisa. I fell asleep hoping that the things I did to protect her wouldn't stain her.

So that's how it went. The fat Skoag came once a week. Mom stayed slimed and happy. The aid lady never suspected a thing. I went to school enough to keep everyone happy, and took care of Lisa. Lisa grew. She turned into a little kid. On Saturdays we'd bus over to Gasworks Park. I'd push her on the swings or we'd watch the fancy kites people fly there. I kept her away from other kids, so she wouldn't be teased about being mute. When some Mommy would say hello to her, or say, "My, such pretty hair," I'd step in and say, "She's real shy. And my Mom says don't talk to strangers." Then I'd take her away and buy her ice cream. No one expects kids to talk while they're eating.

She was three when the message came. The radio was always on for Lisa. Classical music made her close her eyes and sway, or suddenly shiver. Jazz made her hyperactive. If I wanted her to go to sleep, it was good old rock and roll. I should have heard about it. But I never listened to the news, or wasted food money on a newspaper. So I scowled at the check-out guy when he shoved a Seattle *Times* into my brown bag.

"I ain't paying for that," I told him.

"On the house, kid," he told me. "I figure you got a right to know, it being your Skoag and all."

He'd never talked about Lavender before that. He'd treated me decent while Lavender was alive, and he'd never given me a bad time about shopping there after Lavender died. Not like the laundromat where they threw me and our laundry out because they didn't want "Skoag slime clogging the drains." Anyway, he turned right away to the next customer so I knew he didn't want me to say anything. I headed home.

After I got dinner cooking, I unfolded the paper, wondering what I was supposed to look at. The headlines jumped at me. "SKOAG PLANET CONTACT CONFIRMED." I read slowly, trying to understand it. The story said the rumors were confirmed, without saying what they were. The big deal was the Skoags officially sending a message to Earth, planet to planet. The newspaper went on about the sending technology being based on stuff we knew but hadn't thought about using together, and stuff like that. I had to sort through the whole paper to find the last few lines. They scared the hell out of me. Sources wouldn't say what the message had been, but didn't deny it had to do with the ritual murder of a "highly-placed Skoag exile in Seattle."

I didn't know the microwave had buzzed until Mom set food in front

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of me. I looked up, and Lisa had already finished eating. I hated it when Mom did stuff like that. Like she was pretending she was a good little mommy, taking care of her kids instead of a Skoag gropie who didn't give a damn. In the drug classes at school, they called that "ingratiating behavior" and said junkies and alkies used it to fool their families into thinking they were changing, especially if the families were close to sending them to a cure station. It didn't fool me. I crumpled up the paper and gave it to Lisa to play with, and ate dinner.

Two nights later, the man came. Maybe he thought no one would notice a grey government sedan pulled up in front of a slummy house at midnight. I heard someone nearly fall down the ramp, and when he knocked, I opened the door on its chain.

"Yeah," I said, but my stomach was shaking. Skoag slime dependency wasn't supposed to show up in pee tests. That's what all the kids said, and I'd always believed it was true, but what if they'd changed the test and knew from Mom's pee that she was a gropie? But I tried not to let any of that show on my face as I stared out the crack at the government man.

"I have to come in," he said, whispery. "I have to talk to your mother."

"Too bad," I said, being tough. "She's deaf. You can write it down, or you can tell it to me, but you can't talk to her."

"I can sign," he said nervously, echoing with his fingers.

"She can't," I said, and started to close the door.

"Please," he said, not quite shoving his foot in the crack, but leaning on the door to keep it open. "It's about the dead Skoag. Lavender. And it's important, kid."

We stared at each other.

"Look, kid," he finally said. His voice came out normal, not whispery, but real tired. "I can come back with cops tomorrow and kick this door in and drag you out. It's that important. Or you can let me in now, and we'll keep this quiet."

My mom reached past me and undid the chain and the man came in. I hadn't even known she was awake. She looked awful, with her scarred face shining in the streetlamp light leaking in the door. All except for her hair, which was as pretty as ever. She clicked on the light and shut the door behind him. He looked around and said, "Oh, Jesus Christ." It was the first time I'd ever heard a grown man say it like a prayer. Then he sat down at our table, and started signing to my Mom.

He wasn't an aid man, or a drug man, but a real, high up, government man. The second surprise was that my Mom signed back to him. I suddenly remembered I hadn't seen the signing books around in a while. Probably in her room. Ingratiating behavior. I wondered what she'd been signing to Lisa while I was away at school each day. Then I forgot that

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and paid attention to what he was saying. He talked out loud as he signed, like it helped him keep his place or something.

"Lavender's . . . people . . . are very angry . . . about his death. He was . . . important Skoag (the sign for Skoag was to put your fingers on your forehead and make your hand do pushups, like a pulsing membrane). Not exile . . . but like a priest . . . or civil rights worker."

He went on about how important Lavender had been, how he had come in the hopes of reconciling the exiles and instead he started sharing their beliefs, and then went further than they did. It didn't match what Lavender had told me, but I kept my mouth shut. The heart of it was that news of his death had finally reached his home planet, and a lot of Skoags were very upset. The way he said it, I didn't know if the message had just taken that long to get there, or if the exiled Skoags had kept killing Lavender a secret. But I still kept my mouth shut. Anyway, the planet Skoags were going to send someone to look into it, and our government had agreed to co-operate fully. Including letting the Skoag talk to my Mom and me. I felt like telling him it was up to us whether we met the Skoags. But I didn't. He went on about how this was a real opportunity for Humans to establish diplomatic relations with the Skoag planet, and it might be our first step toward deep space, and the U.S. could lead the way, and all that shit. Then he suggested the first thing we'd have to do was move.

That's when I opened my mouth. "No," I said, firmly, and was surprised when my Mom repeated it, "No," very clear.

He talked a lot about why we had to move. The Skoag ambassador or whatever was coming, probably within two or three years. (I was surprised they didn't know exactly when, but they didn't.) And we had to be somewhere nice, so the U.S. wouldn't be embarrassed, and somewhere safe, so no terrorists would try to kidnap us or kill us, and somewhere more official, where advisors could tell us what to say to the Skoags.

He was still explaining at four in the morning, when Mom stood up, said, "NO" very emphatically, and then walked back to her bedroom and shut the door.

He stared at the door. Then he sighed, and rumpled up his hair. "This is a big mistake," he said. And he shook his head. "A damn big mistake that we're all going to hate remembering. You're going to blow it for all of us, kid, for the whole damn human race. Shit. Well, I guess we work around it, then."

So he left.

For a while I lay awake, wondering if there really was danger, if our neighbors would turn on us or terrorists would bomb us. But then I decided that at least terrorists wouldn't try to take Lisa away from me and put her in special school or a home while they treated Mom for being

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a gropie. That would happen for sure if they moved us, because there'd be no way to hide Mom's addiction. That was why Mom said no, too. She was afraid of losing her Skoag slime source. As for me, I could never leave the only place I'd ever shared with Lavender. I stared at the spot where he'd died. The chalk marks were years gone, but I could still see them.

The government man was trickier than I thought. A month later our neighborhood was picked for Facelift Funding. All owners were given *eighteen months to upgrade or lose the funding.* So our walls got spray-sulated and paneled, and they foamed the floor and put in carpet-heat and a tiny insta-hot unit under the sink. Then the old furnace room became part of our apartment, as a second bedroom.

The whole neighborhood changed. They jackhammered up squares of sidewalk and put in skinny little trees, and all the buildings got new siding. They hauled away the trash heap from behind the building, including our old linoleum. They put in a tiny fenced play yard, with organo-turf and big plastic climbing toys. They put flower boxes around the streetlamps. I hated it. They were trying to cover us up, trying to say, these aren't poor people living in their own trash, these are nice folks like in the readers at school. The daddys and mommys have jobs, they go to church and their kids drink white milk and eat brown bread. I hated it, but Lisa loved it. She kept picking the flowers and bringing them to Mom. Mom always put them in a vase, just like Lavender's flowers. Sometimes I wanted to smash it.

I came home from school one day, and a moving van was just pulling away. Scared hell out of me. Had Mom decided to move after all, had she kidnapped Lisa and left? But she was there. "Govamin" she said disgustedly, and stood there like there was no place to sit.

All our old stuff was gone. Even the cupboards and fridge were different, and the cooker was huge, with hot beverage taps on the side. My couch was gone, the friendly smell of mice gone with it. The new one matched the fat chair beside it. The stereo was about as big as a loaf of bread, but it was a real wall-shaker. There was a vid-box, a keyboard console and a mini-dish. Guess the government wanted us to look good.

The new bedroom had twin beds with a dorky little screen between them, like I hadn't been bathing Lisa since she was born. Lisa was bouncing on her bed already, looking like a kid in a catalog. I caught her as she jumped, and for just a second, as she came down in my arms, she looked just like Mom. Exactly. Same hair, same eyes, and I knew it was true, she was Mom's clone and would look just like her when she grew up. Except that her hands and cheeks would never be scarred. I set her down and she ran to Mom and hugged her around the knees. And we stood there and looked around, like there was no place left for us.

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So they thought they changed us, so we wouldn't shame the U.S. when the Skoag came. But they didn't change the fat Skoag's secret Wednesday visits, or Mom's blank humming. The chalk lines were still there, and I could see them right through the carpet. And our neighbors still didn't talk to us.

We waited. One year. Two years. More Skoags came, but not the Skoag we waited for. Three years. Someone wrote a big article in the paper that the whole thing about a Skoag ambassador coming had been a scam, a hoax. The fat Skoag told me the truth. He'd come. He'd talked to the ones that killed Lavender. And he'd agreed it had been necessary. He hadn't wanted to talk to Humans at all.

The carpeting got worn spots, and Lisa scribbled on the new paneling and Mom couldn't get it off. Four years. Graffiti on the buildings, and beer bottles in the flower beds. We forgot about the government and the government forgot about us.

Lisa was seven, nearly eight. We were walking home after a day at Gasworks Park. I was worrying because a letter had come from the school. Someone had turned us in, had reported that a child in our home was being deprived of an equal education. If Lisa didn't go to school, they'd cancel the aid checks. We couldn't get by without the aid checks. I didn't know what the hell to do. I was thinking about running away with her. I was fifteen, nearly old enough to get work somewhere.

A bunch of Skoags were jamming on the corner, same old thing. I kept walking. I never listened to Skoags anymore. I was a block past them before I realized Lisa wasn't with me. I ran back, but it was too late.

All she was doing was listening. Eyes big, lips parted, listening like she always listened to music. The Skoags were playing some old Beatles thing. There were a few tourists, a few hecklers, the usual mix, and the Skoags were playing and Lisa was listening.

Then all of a sudden they stopped, their membranes all swelled out, and they all looked at her. Colors washed through their crests, bright colors, and they started making a sound, an incredible sound like Jesus coming in the sky on a white horse to save us all. It got louder and louder. Skoags started coming out of buildings, flippering down the sidewalks, and as soon as they came, they started making the sound, too, and colors started racing through their crests. They surrounded Lisa, pushing to get closer, all making the sound. It was a glorious Alleluia sound, and Lisa loved it. She glowed and her eyes were huge. I shoved my way in there. I grabbed her hand and I dragged her out of there, past Skoags who reached for us with shining flippers. I snatched her up and ran all the way home and I locked the door behind us.

The next day our street was packed so full of Skoags that cars couldn't pass. Silent Skoags, standing and swaying on their big flat flippers, but

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not making a sound. Staring at our building. Copters flew over, and the film was on television, but the news people had no idea what was going on, they just "urged inhabitants of the affected neighborhood to stay inside and remain calm while officials determine what to do."

It lasted for two days. The streets packed with Skoags, our door locked, and my heart hammering the whole time, until I thought my head would blow up. Suspecting, almost knowing.

On the third day, I woke up to a sound like birds harmonizing with the rush of ocean waves and the laughter of little kids. The sound had been part of a very good dream I was having, so when I woke up and still heard it, I wasn't really awake. Then I realized what had wakened me. A smaller set of sounds. A chair being pushed across the carpet to the door. The chain being undone. I jumped out of bed.

The street was empty, almost. There was only a grey government sedan, and the same government man who had come four years ago. And a big, big Skoag, with a tall purple crest. He was singing the harmonizing bird song, and Lisa was walking straight toward him. She was smiling, and her hair was floating on the wind. Like a dream walker. Then the Skoag opened his mittened flippers to her, and she began to run.

I screamed her name, I know I did, but she didn't seem to hear me. The Skoag picked her up, and I was still running down the street as they all got in the car. The government man gunned it and they were gone.

And that's the end of the story. Almost.

Mom was standing in the doorway, crying. The tears went crooked where they met her scars and flowed around them.

"Go after her!" I screamed. "Get her back. They can't just take her."

"No." She said each word carefully, signing them for emphasis. "They didn't take her. She wanted to go. She *had* to go. She shouldn't have to come back, not just for us."

"You can't know that!" I screamed. "How can you say that?"

She looked at me a long time. "Because I heard it," she signed slowly, silently. I watched her scarred fingers move, the wonder that flooded her face. "I heard it, and it called me. But it wasn't for me, not the me that's here. It was for the other me, the one you made. The one you made for them. The circle closer. The one who listens so well that she has no need to speak. The me done right. But this me heard it and knew how bad she wanted to go."

Then Mom went back in her room and closed her door.

Nothing happened after that. The fat Skoag never came back and Mom never went through withdrawal. I guess the last song was enough to last her forever. I never went to school again, and the government people never came to ask about us. They never came to tell us anything either. There were no write-ups in the paper, no news stories about a little girl

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stolen by the Skoags. No one ever asked why Lisa never came to school. No one ever asked just how much one little girl is worth to the government. Or to a Skoag with a purple crest.

But the next month Boeing got a huge government contract that put half of Seattle back to work, and the papers were full of news about the break-through design that would give us the stars. So I didn't need it spelled out. Do you?

The world gets the stars, the Skoags get Lisa, and I get nothing. Lisa's gone, and with her every touch of Lavender. It was a hard thing he asked of me, but I did it. I looked after the Mom. The Skoags can go back home now. Every day, there are fewer of them on the streets. They always bow to my Mom and me. They no longer sing, but all their crests ripple with color. Sometimes I wonder if Lavender even knew what he was asking.

Or maybe all he meant was that I should look out for Mom, and the rest of it was just an accident. I don't know.

Mom and I still live here. Next month I'll be eighteen. I'll have to register with the Aid office as an adult, and with the Job office for training. Mom's Career Mother checks will stop and she'll have to get job training or lose all her Aid. I'll have to move out, because Aid receivers aren't allowed to let other adults share their homes. Mom will probably get a smaller place.

That's too bad. Because just last night, as I was falling asleep on the couch, I heard a mouse, nibbling inside there.

It's been a good home, really. I had good folks.

LIFE AS CANDYLAND

You pick your color; it sticks for life.
You cannot avoid this. You have to choose,
Become a blue (of peace), a red (of strife),
One of a limited number of hues.
You cannot create new ones. The choices
Have been made for you. Possibilities
Are limited. No room for new voices.
No room for personal agilities.
Then other colors are made yours. A card,
Square or squares upon it, then another.
Will you flip them in your favor? Will Hard
Times come? Milton Bradley is Big Brother.
For ages four to eight this game is made,
Yet by all is it feared, and by all played.

—Scott Edelman

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DE TO LIVE, LIVE TO RIDE

en M. Steele

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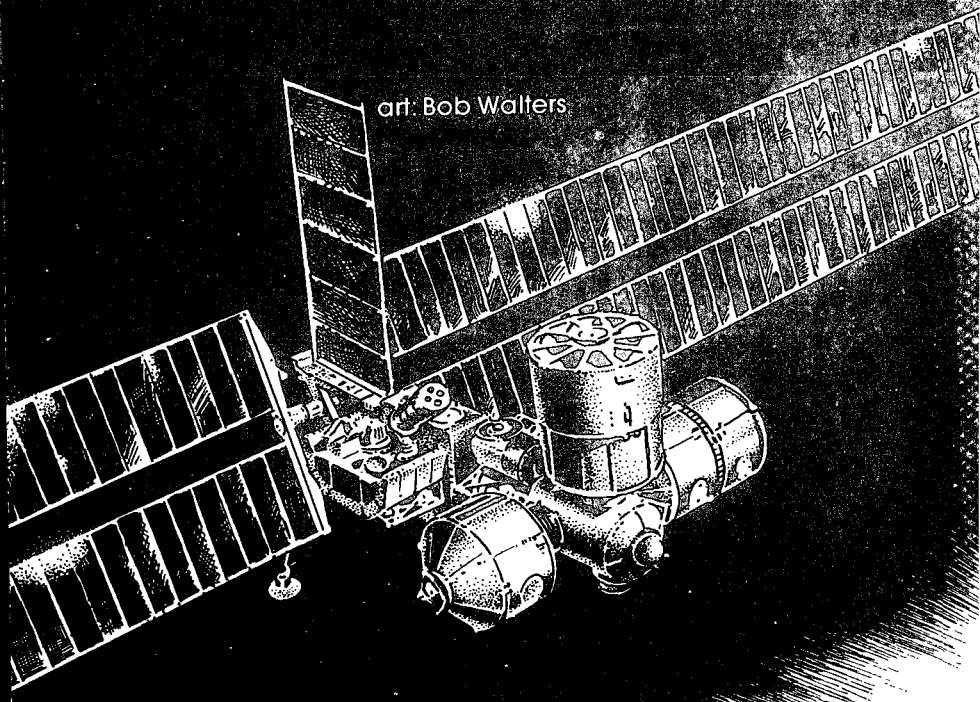
In the midst of a terrifying accident, Virgin Bruce must attempt to rescue two fellow astronauts from the horror of death in space. Bruce, a hard-edged ex-biker, is also a featured character in Allen M. Steele's first novel, *Orbital Decay* (Ace).



art: Bob Walters

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For once, Virgin Bruce felt good. Absolutely on top of the whole damn world. Not only that, but he was feeling good that he was on the clock, a miracle in itself, because he hated to work. He felt so good he could *sing*, and so he did.

A Grateful Dead song, of course: "Truckin' ". Because there was no other music that could compare to the Dead, and that was the point. He had become so fed up with the Muzak which was pumped through his headphones that he had taken matters into his own hands. He had dropped work—right in the middle of the second shift—to fly his pod back from the powersat's construction area to Olympus Station, intent on confronting the project supervisor and asking just why the fuck he had to hear "Theme From *Dr. Zhivago*" ten times a day.

Of course, he didn't get to see Henry Wallace. *No*body gets to see Oz the Great and Powerful: Wallace was always holed up in the station's command center, out of sight, albeit not out of mind. But the station's chief physician had intercepted him at the airlock and, to calm him down, had promised Bruce that he would lend him a tape deck. It was a half-decent compromise—especially since the security chief, Phil Bigthorn, had been ready to knock the crap out of him for disobeying the regulations against flying pods between Olympus Station and the construction shack—and so Virgin Bruce was back in Zulu Tango, on his way back to Vulcan Station. Score another blow for truth, liberty, and rock 'n' roll.

When he finally received the cassette recorder Doc Felapolous had promised him and had it installed in the instrument panel of his pod, he wouldn't have to sing Grateful Dead songs to himself anymore. He would get some tapes shipped up to him—surely one of his few remaining friends in St. Louis wouldn't begrudge him that small favor—and then he could ride in *style*, and never mind the syrupy versions of "Moon River" everyone else was subjected to day in and day out.

As he sang, he glanced through the canopy, checking his trajectory by eyeball, reckoning his distance from the powersat. The computer screen in front of him, which displayed a graphic simulation of his approach angle to the huge geostationary satellite, told him that he was just under a mile away—of course, the numbers were actually in metric figures, but he had long ago become accustomed to making the mental conversion to yards and miles, because he was an *American*, goddammit—but for an experienced pilot nothing could replace eyeball navigation. Bruce pushed the yoke forward a tad and gave the throttle a little push, and one of the RCRs on the fuselage fired, braking his approach. The powersat floated upward a bit. He glanced down at the screen, making sure that the navaids computer agreed with what his eyes told him, and confirmed to himself that he was on a steady course for the construction shack.

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Nice shooting, guy. Who needs the computer? Satisfied, he continued singing . . .

Vulcan Control to Pod Zulu Tango. The voice that snapped through his headphones was loud, rude, and completely unexpected. *What the hell do you think you're doing, Neiman?*

Virgin Bruce sucked in his cheeks and rolled his eyes, the way he remembered Eddie Murphy doing when Bruce was a kid watching *Saturday Night Live* on TV: "Uh, oh, it's the landlord!"

Virgin Bruce reached up to his chin and made sure his headset mike was adjusted, then reached to the communications panel to switch it on. To his chagrin, he found that it had already been switched on. Oh, hell, he thought. I must have been singing to the whole shift!

Recklessly, his lips stretched away from his teeth in a huge grin. Nothing to do but brazen it out. He started in on the next verse of "Truckin' " . . .

Neiman, we got the ways and means to can your pay for the week if you don't shape up and fly right. Now you come back with something other than sing-a-long or you and me are going to have a major disagreement, if we don't already have one. Do you copy?

"I copy, Hank, I copy," Bruce snarled into the mike. "And what's this crap about flying right? My trajectory is as clean and regulation as you're gonna get, man."

Bullshit, Neiman. Take another look at your screen. You just cut off a Big Dummy coming in on final approach to Vulcan. The pilot had to waste fuel braking so he'd keep the safe minimum distance for you and your hotdogging.

Neiman frowned. Hank Luton, the construction supervisor, wasn't fooling this time; he was mad. He punched a couple of keys on the LCD board and got a wide-angle display of the space around his pod. Sure enough, it showed an HLV from Earth on an approach trajectory to the construction shack. A quick glance at the coordinates told him that his pod had zipped straight in front of the big freighter. He felt instantly sorry; he, too, had been forced to make unnecessary firings to correct for careless flying by other pilots in the crowded sphere of space surrounding Vulcan Station.

"Hey, Hank, I sure as shit am sorry about that," Virgin Bruce said, genuinely apologetic. "I just didn't see that guy. Tell him I'm . . ."

I don't give a goddamn how sorry you are, Neiman!

Virgin Bruce winced. Luton *must* be mad; no one shouts into a mike like that unless he's full-fledged furious. It was enough to make his ears ring. The construction supervisor kept on, in just a slightly quieter tone of voice. *I don't like the crap you just pulled, you got that? I don't like you taking off to Olympus without getting authorization, and I don't like what*

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you just tried to pull over there! You're nothing special to us, Neiman, you put on your pants the same as the rest of us! You think you got a problem, you take it to me. I'm your boss and not Henry Wallace! You got that, pal? I mean do you got that?

"Loud and clear, Hank," he murmured. Hell, this was on an open channel. Everyone on the shift, and on Olympus—even on Earth, if they were hooked up with the right equipment—must be hearing this chew-out. "How many times do you want me to say sorry, Hank?"

Silence for a minute. Then Luton's voice came back, authoritative and cold. *Neiman, you're relieved of your shift. I want you to dock at Vulcan and meet me in the hotdogs. You and me are going to talk about your job, pal.*

"Job? What do you mean, talk about my job?" Bruce almost yelled back. "Listen, Hank, who's done the most shift-hours up here? Who's. . . ?"

Zulu Tango, this is Vulcan Traffic. Luton's Alabama-accented voice was replaced by Sammy Orlando's Brooklyn nasality. *We have you on course for docking at Vulcan, do you acknowledge? Over.*

Virgin Bruce checked his own bearings. No, he was not on course to dock at the construction shack; in fact he was heading a mile away from Vulcan, out to a section of the powersat most of the shift's crew had been working on all day. Sammy was too good a traffic control officer to miss that; he was subtly letting Bruce know that he didn't have a choice as to his destination. Not if his job mattered.

"Roger, Sammy, that's an affirmative," Bruce growled back. "Request docking at Vulcan Beta, over."

We copy, Zulu Tango. Proceed for docking in the garage. Vulcan Traffic out.

" 'Ride to live, live to ride,' " Virgin Bruce said, his customary sign-off: a biker slogan. "Tango out." He snapped off the comlink, squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, and murmured, "Oh, shit."

He would have to handle this carefully, as gently as laying down a bike at sixty in a cow-pasture, otherwise that was what he going to get up smelling like: shit. He opened his eyes and began to make the necessary course corrections that would bring him in toward Vulcan Station. The long, huge grid of the powersat began to glide past the top of his windows; he could see the tiny forms of spacesuited beamjacks clinging to its underside, their helmet beacons making tiny moving spots of light along the silver girders. *Very carefully,* he reminded himself as he flipped to autopilot. Otherwise it was goodbye space and hello Missouri.

Actually, it wasn't the thought of getting fired and shipped back to Earth that bothered him so much. He was sick to death of space; he wasn't particularly stuck on beamjack work, and sometimes he thought he would gag if he had to swallow any more of the freeze-dried guano

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they served in the mess deck. He wanted to go back, but the time wasn't right yet. The heat hadn't blown over down there yet. If he went back now, it would only be a matter of time before the Satan's Exiles found out where he was and tracked him down.

It was a nightmarish fantasy, which had haunted him for over a year now. He would be in a room—maybe an apartment he had rented, maybe a seedy motel room in Texas or Maine or Colorado, where he thought he was safe. Maybe he would be expecting someone to come by—a friend he had made in a bar, or some nice chick with full tits and ass-length hair he had been laying—and he would go answer the door, but the buddy or the babe wouldn't be standing there. There would be four or five of them standing at the door. The light of a twenty-watt bulb would be shining dimly on their leathers and the chains they'd be carrying. Maybe one or two of them would be grinning with savage humor, but the others would have the dark, vicious glower they had all too often fixed on those stupid enough to say the wrong thing or make the wrong move. Maybe he'd try to slam the door; maybe he wouldn't even bother, knowing they could bash their way through in seconds. Hello, Brucie, they'd say. Long time no see.

Then they'd stomp him into the floor so far the cockroaches would have to get shovels to find him.

Nobody leaves the Satan's Exiles and lives to tell about it.

Take it easy with Hank Luton, man, he told himself, grasping the stick firmly with both hands as he headed the pod toward Vulcan Station. Tell him you're sorry. Tell him it won't happen again. Let him chew you out and don't give him any shit back. Do whatever you *got* to do, man, but don't let him think the best thing for him to do is to send you back to Earth and get a replacement, because you know the Exiles have put an APB out for you with the Angels and the Outlaws and all the rest, and they can find you if you come up from hiding too fast. Do what it takes to survive, Bruce man . . .

A blinking red light on the communications panel caught his attention. He frowned; it was the priority alert for the comlink, informing everyone that there was something on the main channel that everyone on active duty needed to monitor.

He flicked the monitor switch, and instantly he heard the high, beeping whine of the general alarm which all but drowned out the sound of several voices chattering at once in an almost unintelligible garble. Bruce's eyes went wide, and this time he wasn't playing Eddie Murphy.

Something had just gone seriously wrong on Vulcan Station.

Outer space is an environment which seldom forgives mistakes. It is the most relentless environment into which man has ever ventured. It

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is an engineer's nightmare, a hell in heaven for the foolhardy and the stupid. Although to enter, live, and work there demands perfection in every detail, it is in man's nature to make mistakes, and therein lies the rub.

During the first decades of spaceflight most of the mistakes were made in the comparatively soft and safety-redundant environment of the launch pad. The mistakes led to long delays in launches and scrubbings of flights and, in the instance of the Apollo 1 fire in 1967, the death of three men who were being groomed to walk on the Moon. But although there were near-fatal accidents in orbit during the first years of the American and Russian space programs, it was a long time before anyone died in space. The worst failures of man and machine were caught on the ground, where the consequences were less terrifying.

But mistakes always happen. They always have; they always will. No matter how sophisticated space technology became, flaws slipped in. Sometimes men died as the result. Sometimes it didn't matter. A radio transceiver not switched on, a tether not securely fastened, a misfire of an MMU backpack in the wrong direction, a too-hard docking of a spacecraft, careless entry of a program into a computer, a lost tool during EVA, misunderstood communications between spacemen, miscalculation of body movement in zero g, any imaginable combination of dumb jerk boo-boos: These mistakes, which were easily corrected or buffered by safety programs, were more often measured in nuisance value than in their contributions to early graves being dug.

Yet there were other types of error which were not easily avoidable. Bad engineering on the ground; mistakes made in design or manufacture of items on Earth, which would later be carried into that place of no atmosphere, no gravity, and extremes of heat and cold. Those mistakes killed.

A construction pod undocked from Vulcan Station and began to head toward the powersat. Its pilot, a young beamjack named Alan McPhee, gently steered the tiny spacecraft around the bend in Vulcan's bell-shaped Beta module, heading toward its underside on a course that would take him beneath both construction shack and solar power satellite. His trajectory took him past the "hotdogs," the pressurized personnel modules mounted on Vulcan's outer fuselage. They were called hotdogs because they resembled link-sausages; in fact, they were temporary compartments made of inflated Mylar, designed so that they could be conveniently moved around the shack's bar-like structure. It was here that the powersat's construction crews suited up for each shift.

McPhee was a good pilot, but his skill was not enough to cope with a flaw in his spacecraft.

A fuel cell, a sphere the size of a gymnasium medicine ball, which was

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strapped to the outside of the pod's fuselage, had a weak skin. It had been manufactured by a small aerospace company in Illinois, which subcontracted to Skycorp. The fuel cells were supposed to be carefully inspected by X-ray equipment for weak points, yet this one had slipped through because the technician in charge had been thinking too much about her impending breakup with her boyfriend. A couple of months later, the faulty cell had been repressurized in the construction shack's pod garage almost a dozen times. Each time had put additional pressure upon a thin spot in the cell's lining, which was absolutely undetectable to the naked eye.

This time, when McPhee took his pod out for another shift, carrying rebars to beamjacks around the powersat, the soft point on the cell's skin yielded to the internal pressure from the liquid-fuel mix.

Soundlessly, the fuel cell exploded in space, just as the construction pod was passing the hotdog modules.

Claude Hooker clamped the tubes leading from his life-support pack into the sockets on his suit's midsection and gave them a clockwise twist which locked them in place, then took the helmet off the overhead rack and tucked it under his arm. Grabbing a rail with his free hand, he slipped the toes of his boots free from the foot restraints on the floor. Now floating free in the compartment of the whiteroom, he began to pull himself toward the hatch leading to the next compartment, where technicians would ease him into an MMU pack before he would cycle through the airlock and head to work.

He passed Mike Webb, the beamjack who had sat next to him on the ferry from Olympus Station, and another spaceman, a new guy whose name Hooker couldn't remember. Webb was notorious for being slow in the whiteroom, and the rookie was as inept at getting ready for EVA as only a tenderfoot could be. Webb gave Hooker a quick thumbs-up and a silly grin as a technician struggled to wiggle the beamjack's legs into the lower half of his spacesuit. Hooker shrugged and managed a weak smile, returned the thumbs-up. The new guy was trying to retrieve a glove which was floating away from him, and Hooker absently batted it back within his reach with his free hand. The rookie, whose name-patch read HONEYMAN, nodded and said, "Thanks, Popeye."

"No sweat, Honeyman," Hooker replied. As he passed the optical scanner near the hatch, Hooker paused to hold his right wrist in front of the lens, allowing the computer to read numbers printed on the card strapped to the cuff and clock him in. A green light flashed on and Hooker started to enter the hatch, gently rotating to a horizontal position so that he could fit through the narrow aluminum sleeve.

"Hey, Popeye, hold on!" someone called behind him. Hooker grabbed

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a handhold by the hatch, stopping himself, and looked around. Julian Price, the young black kid who worked in the whiteroom as a suit tech, was pushing himself up alongside. Price reached over to Hooker's left leg, reached under the cuff of the overgarment, and relocked the loose ankle joint above the boot.

"Be careful there, man," he murmured. "You could get in trouble that way, big time."

"Thanks, Julian. Wasn't thinking."

"*Always* gotta keep thinkin', Popeye," Julian said, giving Hooker's suit a quick once-over inspection. "They don't look at you when they're putting on your pack over there, man, and I can't check everything you're doing when you're suiting up. I mean, I can do my job, but it starts and ends with you, man. . . ."

"Yeah, uh-huh," Hooker grumbled. "See you later, Julian."

"Check ya, Popeye," Price finished, letting him go. He seemed mildly stung. "I mean, don't be too appreciative or nuthin' now."

Hooker paused again, looking back at Julian. "Sorry, Julio. Didn't mean anything. I owe you one."

Julian's grin returned. He gave Hooker the thumbs-up. "No offense taken, Popeye. Be careful out there."

Hooker returned the ancient gesture and pushed himself through the hatch into the connecting sleeve, wanting to kick himself for being so short-tempered with the kid. God damn it, Julian looked out for all the beamjacks going out on EVA like the manager of a high school football team making sure the shoulder pads fit and the jocks were washed. It was a thankless job, but somebody had to do it, and Julian did it well. He had probably caught enough loose suit joints, badly connected air hoses, and minute cracks in spacesuit armor to keep an army of beamjacks from blowing out their guts in decompression accidents. No one here had the right to snub him.

Ah, hell, Hooker thought. I'll find a way to make it up to him. Hooker had plenty of telephone time logged to his credit that he had never used; there was nobody on Earth he needed to call. I'll let him make a call to his mom and dad in Washington D.C., Hooker decided. That'll make up for . . .

There was suddenly a roar from far behind him, like a shotgun blast—a thin, reedy whistle which sounded like someone trying to play a broken flute; moments later, there was the electronic warbling sound of an alarm going off. He instinctively convulsed in midair, like a man trying to duck a gunshot; his head banged against the side of the sleeve, and he saw stars for an instant.

He then realized that the roar had come from behind, from the other whiteroom, adjacent to the one he had just left. The alarm that was

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warbling was one he had heard only once before during his duty tour, during an instruction drill when he had first come aboard. He twisted around, performing a cramped somersault within the sleeve, and caught a glimpse of a miniature cyclone ripping through the compartment he had just vacated. Logbook pages, loose pens, overgarment segments and other loose items were being caught by the wind and thrown around in the unnatural gale. He saw the emergency hatch seal on the hatch on the other side of the whiteroom iris shut like a closing sphincter.

"Blowout!" he heard Mike Webb scream. "It's a blowout!"

But if it was only the far whiteroom which had been affected, then where was that high, reedy sound coming from? Something else was wrong. . . .

Julian Price floated past the sleeve hatch, his back turned to Hooker, his hands flailing as he tried to grab hold of something the way Webb and Honeyman had, grasping suit racks against the gale raging inside the compartment. Without really thinking about it, Hooker reached through the hatch and grabbed Price's ankle just above the top of his sneakers. The kid yelled as Hooker yanked him into the sleeve as hard as he could; he bounced off Hooker as both of them were crammed into the narrow space, slamming Hooker against the side of the sleeve.

At that moment, the emergency hatches on either side of the sleeve irised shut, trapping the two men inside. It was suddenly quiet, except for the dull sound of the emergency Klaxon from the whiteroom. A single, recessed bulb by Hooker's left shoulder threw an amber glow across their faces.

Julian Price forced his right forearm up between him and Hooker; the two men were squeezed together as tight as if they were both lying in the same sleeping bag. There was an intercom unit strapped to Price's wrist, and he clumsily jabbed at the TALK button with his chin. "Mayday! Mayday!" he yelled into his headset mike, which miraculously had not been torn off during the decompression hurricane. "Price to Control, blowout in Modules One and Two!"

Sammy Orlando's voice came through the headset earphone; Hooker could hear it tinnily. *We're aware of that, damn it! Get off the line! There's nothing . . .*

It was replaced by Luton's voice. *How'd you get out of there? There's total decompression in both compartments! Everyone who was in them is dead already!*

"Bullshit!" Price yelled back. "I just got out of Number Two! There's two men trapped in there; you gotta get 'em out!"

Our instruments tell us it's total decompression . . . something pierced both those hotdogs. There should be no one left alive in either one!

"And I'm telling you, man, there's two men stuck in Number Two!"

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Price hollered. "I dunno about Hotdog One, but Webb and Honeyman are still in Two! They've got a slow leak in there or something, but they're still alive, you gotta. . . !"

"I'm wearing a spacesuit, Julian!" Hooker shouted. "I can get 'em out! Tell 'em to open the hatch!"

"Hank, Hooker's wearing a suit and he says . . ."

Are you wearing a suit, Price?"

"Negative, Control."

Then forget it. You two just sit tight. Luton paused. *I don't want to risk one man because the other might have a chance. Those guys only have a few minutes. I don't want the body count to go up any more than it has. Where're you two, in a sleeve?*

"Roger!"

Then just stay there. We'll get someone to get you out soon. Forget those guys, son. I hate to say it, but they're dead men.

"Screw you, asshole!" Price screamed. "Open the goddamn hatch!"

"Zulu Tango to Vulcan Command, do you copy?"

He waited a moment, then tried it again: "Zulu Tango to Vulcan, do you read, dammit!"

Virgin Bruce didn't know if anyone had heard him. The main comlink channel was a confusion of voices; most of the other channels he had scanned were similarly garbled. Whatever had happened at the shack, it had occurred so quickly that no one seemed to know exactly what the nature of the emergency was, or even what they were supposed to do.

Command, something's blown in Hotdog Two, I'm seeing oxygen vapor coming from—!

Repair shifts to Hotdogs One and Two! This is Command, repair crews on shift to Hotdogs. . . .!

Holy shit, there's a body out there! We need a medic at the shack!

Vulcan, this is pod Romeo Virginia. I've had an explosion on my aft fuel cell. I have loss of control and I'm in tumble. Repeat, Vulcan, this is Romeo Virginia, I've got a problem. . . ?

Romeo Virginia, what the hell are you. . . ?

Goddammit, Hank, get that fucking hatch open or I'll . . .

Where's the damn repair crew!

This is Romeo Virginia! I've got one of the kits!

Romeo, get to the hotdogs! There's been a blowout on One and Two! One's lost, get Two. . . !

For the love of Pete, Luton, open the fucking hatch so I can get . . .

Squelch Hooker, Sammy. Romeo, get to—!

Negative, Hank, I've got no control! My fuel cell blew up and . . .

Oh, my God, that's Luke, that's Luke who's—!

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Everybody, goddammit SHUT UP! Who's got the repair kits! Who's on the shift—!

Virgin Bruce sank back into his couch, staring straight ahead. Now, in the gleam of the shack's navigational lights a mile and a half away, he could see a phosphorescent, tiny white cloud of water and oxygen forming near Module Alpha. Something had blown out one of the hotdogs; two, if what he heard was right. He didn't want to think what the larger objects he could pick out dimly in the tiny cloud might be.

Command, this is the main bay, we've got stress on the beam-builder assembly! The whole shack's shaking—!

This is Caldwell, Command! I've got the other kit, but I'm way out on the powersat on tether, repeat, I don't have a pack . . .

What the hell are you doing without . . . never mind, who's got a sealkit!

Jesus! How could he have forgotten! Virgin Bruce craned his neck back and checked the ceiling space above and behind his head. Strapped to the bulkhead, next to the first aid kit, was the sealkit: a compression tank with a foam nozzle. He had been issued the emergency kit last time around, but had forgotten to turn that kit over to another pod pilot; he had been too pissed off about the elevator music.

Sammy, turn off the damn alarm!

Command, I'm too far out here, I can't . . .

Abruptly, the emergency horn ceased to split his ears. Eerily, things suddenly seemed as if they had gone back to normal, except for the yelling on the main channel.

Medic, we need a medical crew . . .

Screw it, George, they're dead! Hank Luton said harshly. *Who the hell has a —!*

Bruce stabbed at the switches on his communications board, bringing himself back on the line. "Hank, this is Zulu Tango! I've got a kit and I'm coming in!"

Oh, for Christ's . . . Bruce, you don't know what the hell you're . . .

"Hey, fuck you, Hank! I got a sealer, so get off my back and lemme get those guys. . . ."

Bruce, you only got a couple of minutes maybe! This was Sammy Orlando's voice now. *Haul ass, man!*

"Right, Vulcan," he snapped. Hell, if Luton wanted to play games while men were dying, he'd take Sammy's word as the go-ahead. "Get a fix on me and clear the traffic on a line between me and it. I'm comin' through!"

Neiman? Hank Luton's voice again. *You've got the go-ahead. But if you fuck this up, pal, I'll . . .*

"Get outta my ear and lemme work, Hank!" Bruce yelled into his mike as he switched off the autopilot. "You just tell me where to go, I'll do the rest!"

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You got maybe three minutes, Neiman, maybe not that. Make 'em count, you son of a bitch.

"Sammy, kill the rest of the bells, will ya? I don't need to be reminded how bad the situation is."

Vulcan's command center was a dimly lit compartment with a low ceiling, crowded with control consoles in every available space except for a narrow deck lined with stirrup-like foot restraints. When the shit had hit the fan, Hank Luton had lifted his toes out of his retraints and was now floating horizontal to the floor, holding onto rungs on the bulkheads. It was easier to get to things in a small compartment that way, if you were used to zero-g and could swim in it.

The last of the alarms—it seemed as if a dozen had all gone off at once, warning of explosive decompression, emergency hatches being shut, loss of orbital stability, and more simultaneous emergencies—went silent, leaving only the chatter of voices from the comlink channels. Sammy Orlando, his skinny frame still harnessed into his chair in front of the communications board, was intently listening to something coming through his headset. He looked over his shoulder at the construction supervisor.

"Hank, I just heard from the Korolev cosmodrome," he said. "The Russians have picked up our signals and are offering rescue assistance."

"Oh, swell. That's great news." Luton ran a free hand over his balding forehead; what sweat hadn't caught in his kinky hair rubbed off into beady droplets which hung in the air. The Soviets were also maintaining a station in GEO orbit, but even by a straight-line trajectory it was still several thousand miles away. The best they could do now was to send over another pod to serve as a meat wagon for the dead . . . "Tell 'em thanks, but no thanks," Luton replied. "Tell 'em we got everything under control, thank you anyway."

"Sir, the Space Rescue Treaty . . ."

"Damn it, Sammy, I'm not going to play U.N. right now! Tell the Russians to take a hike and keep an eye on what Neiman's doing!"

He turned his head to look over Sammy's shoulder at the traffic control screen. One white spot on the screen indicated where Virgin Bruce's pod was located; it was moving closer to the center as he watched. Another white spot, Alan McPhee's pod, was hanging nearby; a blue line between Neiman's pod and the construction shack showed that Zulu Tango would come close, but not intersect, the point where Romeo Virginia was floating dead in space. "How bad is McPhee's drift?"

Orlando made a quick computation on his computer. "A few hundred meters per minute. Want to send a rescue pod?"

"Negative. He sounds okay, just a little shaken. Keep an eye on him,

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that's all." He found himself smiling. "If he gets too far away, get the Russians to rescue him, if it'll make 'em feel important."

The communications officer looked over her shoulder. "I'm getting a message from Hooker and Price. They wanna . . ."

"I heard, I heard!" Luton yelled. "Julie, keep listening to them, and if it sounds like they're running out of air, get Mike to open the other hatch and let 'em out, but I don't want to hear their crap again. Mike, how're they doing?"

"I think they'll be okay for a few minutes," the engineering officer said tersely. "I'm worried about the beam-builders."

"Shit. Didn't you get those things cut loose?" Without waiting for a reply, Luton somersaulted to face the wide port which overlooked the main construction bay. He could see that the massive machines had been disengaged from their telescoping supports and were now drifting below the construction shack at the ends of the beams they had been processing before their shutdown. "I see 'em. What's the problem?"

"They might break loose."

"Oh, great." The beam-builders cost several billion dollars and had required separate shuttle flights to get them into space, due to their size and mass. Losing one of them would be almost worse than having a man killed.

But not quite. "Just keep an eye on them," Luton snapped impatiently. "Put a man on each of them if you get a chance. I'm not worried about . . ."

"Hank! I'm getting something from Number Two!" Julia Smith yelled.

"They're still alive?" Luton attempted to roll over again, in midair, but he did it too fast and his torso rammed into an overhead panel. He swore again and glanced down to make sure no important switches had been thrown. "What's going on, who's that, what's he . . ."

"It's . . . incoherent." Julia's pretty eyes were squeezed shut. She had listened to long strings of profanities from beamjacks on duty without scarcely batting an eyelash, but what she was hearing now was giving her pain. "He's . . . he's panicking, Hank."

Who wouldn't, Luton thought. Who couldn't? He remembered what he had (cruelly, he now realized in spontaneous hindsight) told Hooker a minute (had it been that short a time?) ago: *They're dead men.* "Try to talk to them," he rasped. "Tell 'em to hang on . . . or something. Help's on the way."

He craned his neck to glance out through the port. Out beyond the hemisphere of Module B, where earthlight shone on the skeleton of the powersat, he could see the growing spotlights of pod Zulu Tango approaching the shack. A strange, bitter irony: the end of this deadly, sudden nightmare rested with a man he had been half-intending to fire

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from his job ten minutes ago. Everything depended on a sleazy biker from Missouri: It was as disgusting as it was horrifying.

"Sammy, just make sure he's on course and nothing's in his way," the shift supervisor said, his dark eyes locked on the approaching construction pod. To himself, he murmured, "Bruce, for Christ's sake, don't fuck up this time."

It was hard to breathe now; the air inside the whiteroom had become so rarefied that he had to gasp for each lungful. The cyclonic wind which had ripped through the compartment had settled some, which made Webb realize that most of the air was already gone. Soon, it would all go through that inch-long slit in the fabric wall. When it did, he and Honeyman would die.

Webb clung with one hand to an overhead rail and took deep gasps of cold oxygen. His fingers were turning numb and the upper portion of his body—the part which was not encased in spacesuit armor—was becoming chilled, since the heat had been sucked out along with most of the cabin pressure. He doubted he would freeze before he suffocated, however. Even though the bit of shrapnel which had punctured the hotdog was wedged in the wall fast enough to prevent explosive decompression of the type which had killed the two guys in Hotdog One, the leak was fast enough that he knew he and Honeyman would die in a couple of minutes, three at best.

He almost envied those guys. They had gone out quick. What was that old movie poster line? "In space, no one can hear you scream"? He *had* heard them scream, just before the emergency hatches had irised shut. But Webb knew that they must not have screamed for very long. Now Honeyman was doing enough screaming for them all.

"Get us out of here!"

The rookie beamjack was hanging on to a handhold near an intercom panel, howling at it in stark terror. Tears had streamed from his eyes and were floating around his face in fat globules. "Goddammit, you bastards, I don't want to die, get me *out* of here!" His voice was turning hoarse and, in the decreasing atmospheric pressure, tinny, as if he were farther away than fifteen feet. Webb noticed that Honeyman's chest was heaving with the effort to sustain his howling; he also noticed, in disgust, a dark splotch in the crotch of the beamjack's jumpsuit where he had urinated in fear.

"Shut up, damn it!" Webb forced himself to yell. He didn't want to die, either, but he was damn sure not going to go out like a coward, or in the company of one if he could help it.

The absurd part of it was, there he was in a spacesuit bottom, with other parts of a suit floating around in the compartment, and there wasn't

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any way he could use them. Not in time, at least. Getting into a suit was a long procedure. Even half-dressed as he was, Webb would still need ten to fifteen minutes to struggle into the top half, join the halves with the connecting flap, connect the hoses and adjust the air supply, put on the gauntlets and don the helmet. This was even if he omitted steps like adjusting and switching on the interior water-cooling system or donning the overgarment. Parts of the spacesuit had been scattered all across the compartment by the escaping pressure; just gathering them would take a couple of precious minutes . . . It wasn't even worth trying.

"You fucking shits! You rat-fucking bastards! Get me—!"

"Shaddup, Honeyman!" Webb snapped. He thought of the first American astronauts to die in a spacecraft. Gus Grissom, Ed White, and Roger Chaffee. The Apollo 1 fire at the Cape, way back before the first moon landing. Even at the end, when the fire in the tiny command module was reaching for their bodies and their lungs were filing with smoke, they had been trying to undo the hatch the engineers had made so well that it couldn't be opened quickly in an emergency. They had screamed, that was for certain, but they had also fought for their lives until they lost consciousness.

Bad engineering and lack of foresight was going to kill him and Honeyman as well. Whoever had designed the hotdogs, in trying to conserve space inside the cramped little compartments for suit racks and TV monitors, had apparently decided that rescue balls were not needed here, and that sealkits should be given to the astronauts working outside the hotdogs, not put inside. No way to seal the hole from inside, after all . . .

Or *was* there?

A flash of inspiration hit him, an old Dutch legend he had learned in childhood. My mind must be going, Webb thought. My life must be passing before my eyes, to recall something like that *now*.

Yet he looked around and spotted what he was looking for: a spacesuit glove, floating in midair a couple of yards away. Without allowing himself time to think through what he was going to do, to consider the dangers—no time, no time—Webb let go of the rail and pushed himself towards the glove. Grabbing at it as he passed, he shoved his right hand into the thick gauntlet as he automatically braked his plunge through the compartment with his feet. The glove fit snugly on his hand, and for the first time since he had been a beamjack, Webb didn't mind the tight fit. He would need that snugness, every fraction of an inch of it, for what he was about to pull off.

If he could pull it off. Webb took another deep lungful of rapidly thinning oxygen, then pushed off again with his legs. Arms thrust in front of his head, he launched himself toward the hole.

* * *

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Virgin Bruce tried not to look at the bodies. One was floating close to the construction pod's canopy; the corpse was wearing a jumpsuit which was blotched with frozen red blood, and Bruce was glad that at least he couldn't see the face. Explosive decompression was a grotesque way to die. It may have been sudden, but the beamjack must still have had a long, final minute of horror and agony. . . .

Forget it, he told himself. Forget that the stiff was probably a friend of yours. Concentrate. He ran his gaze over the bank of instruments above the viewports, making sure the pod's cabin was depressurized and that all the engines were safed, then quickly glanced at the tiny bank of lights within his helmet, just above the rim of the visor. Everything was green. Virgin Bruce grabbed a lever on the left next to his seat and pushed it forward. The hatch directly over his head undogged and opened to space.

The construction pod was held by its arms to the hull of the construction shack, an emergency maneuver only seldom rehearsed and never, in his memory, actually put to use in a real-life crisis. His seat harness was already undone; Bruce planted his feet on either side of his seat and pushed himself upwards through the hatch. He propelled himself out of the pod faster than he had anticipated, into the red and white glare of the navigational beacons arranged around the shack's hull. They dazzled his eyes for a moment, and he raised the handjet blindly to shoulder-length and squeezed the trigger. The spurt of the jet slowed his momentum and he blinked furiously, trying to clear his vision. Christ, he had not expected it to be so *bright* outside. . . .

Neiman, what's going on?

"I'm outside the pod, Hank," he said. It had been a long time since he had gone EVA, not since he had tested with a pod and satisfied the supervisors that he was competent with the buglike machines. For an instant he felt vertigo, and he forced it down. "I'm about"—he squinted his eyes and peered at the rounded surface of the shack's B module below his feet—"fifteen, twenty feet above the hotdogs."

Your pod secure?

"Roger." Actually, he hadn't checked since he had left it, but if the magnetic shoes on the claws had not held and it had started to drift, he was not about to go back and fool with it at this point—Let the damn thing drift. "Now shut up and lemme work."

Bruce—then Hank Luton shut up. His vision cleared, Virgin Bruce started easing himself downward toward the hotdogs. Of all things now, he didn't need Luton giving him the mother hen treatment.

Never mind, he thought. Forget that dipshit. Save those poor bastards' skins. Going head-first, he steered his body around until he faced the hotdogs. Through the visor, he could see the debris caused by the accident:

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torn scraps of Mylar and aluminum mesh, odds and ends blown out from Hotdog One, tumbling in microgravitational orbit around the shack. He hadn't spotted the body of the other crewman killed by One's explosion yet, and he prayed that he wouldn't. That was all he needed now to completely freak him out; his stomach told him again that it had been a long time since he had last gone spacewalking.

Nothing to grab onto on the shack's hull; he had to rely completely on the little handjet, something which he had only used once before, during the initial week of training. Probably no one had used one seriously since Olympus had been built six years ago. He felt his mouth going dry, but he didn't dare distract himself by sipping from the water straw inside his helmet; those guys would be fighting for their last gasps by now. He forced thoughts of the immensity of space around him from his mind. The inside of the suit chafed at his skin.

He made it to Hotdog Two and to the first thing he could grab, the hemisphere of struts holding the rubbery cylinder in place. He grabbed a strut with his free hand and started to ease himself along, pulling himself along carefully so as to not accidentally push himself away and off into space. Glancing down, his eyes widened as he saw that the tightly stretched multilayer fabric of the temporary module was already beginning to sag inward, like an inner tube being leaked. It could be only a matter of seconds now. . . .

Neiman, where are you?

"I'm on the hotdog, Hank, shut the hell up already!" Okay, he had arrived, now where was the damn hole. . . .

His helmet lantern swept the area and caught a small, ragged edge protruding from the side of the module. There it was! "I got it!" he yelled. It was only a few feet away now. "Hang on . . . hang on . . ." he mumbled.

Neiman . . .

"Will you shut the hell up, Hank. I'm trying!" Virgin Bruce yelled. He yanked himself forward and almost threw himself off the strut in his haste. He had to stretch his hand out just to grab the next bar.

He was almost on top of the rip and was reaching for the sealkit where he had strapped it to his right thigh, when he noticed something peculiar: a jagged piece of metal, glinting in the light, slowly tumbling away from the rip. It was obviously a piece of the fuel cell which had exploded—he could tell from its general shape and form—but if it was, why had it not lodged itself in the hotdog when it had come so close? Indeed, why was it drifting *away* from . . . ?

Oh, my God, he thought. It's the piece that was lodged in the skin. It had to be. But if it had become dislodged, then why wasn't the hotdog exploding?

He looked down at the rip, and saw a stubby white cylinder sticking

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out of the hole. It was effectively stopping the rip like a cork in a bottle. Amazed, he stared at the object for a long moment under the glare of his helmet lantern's beam. There was something familiar-looking about that thing, yet he couldn't quite put his finger on it. . . .

Suddenly, he began to laugh. He heard Luton's voice in his headset: *Neiman, listen, it's okay. Mike Webb's inside the hotdog and . . .*

"I know, Hank, I know!" he nearly shouted. "I can see it! It's his damn finger!"

The command center's hatch was already open, and Sammy Orlando was pushing himself out when Virgin Bruce showed up. Sammy stopped in the passageway, startled to see the beamjack. "You're out of your mind," he whispered. "Don't go in there."

Bruce was now wearing only shorts, a faded Grateful Dead T-shirt, and sneakers, having shucked his suit in Hotdog Three. He shrugged. "Hank said he wanted to see me, didn't he?" he murmured. "Well, let's get it done. I'm a busy man."

He grinned at the traffic control officer. Sammy closed his eyes and shook his head, then patted Bruce's arm as he pulled himself along a handrail towards the john. "You're the craziest dude I've ever met," he muttered.

Hank Luton was seated at his workstation, listening to something through his headset as he gazed through the port at the main bay. He glanced up at Bruce, then looked away again. "Make yourself comfortable, Neiman, I'll . . ."

He paused, interrupting himself, then said into his headset mike, "Yes . . . yes, Henry, I understand . . . uh-huh, second shift's off the clock, we're sending 'em back now . . . uh-huh, Webb and Honeyman are already on their way over to sickbay . . . right, Vulcan out."

Luton blew out his cheeks as he pulled the headset down around his neck and turned around in his chair to look at Neiman. "Well, you're the first to hear it. Skycorp's called for a stop-work until we can replace the hotdogs with hard modules, so I guess we're all about to take a paid vacation . . . even if nobody gets to go home."

"Nobody?" Bruce shoved his toes into the foot restraints on the floor and crossed his arms. "Hank, somehow I had the impression that you were about to can me."

The construction supervisor stared back at Virgin Bruce for a few long seconds. "Don't be so smug. *You* didn't save those guys. Webb figured out a neat trick, that finger bit. He was way ahead of you, so don't think you're some kind of hero now, pal."

Bruce nodded. "Yeah, maybe not. But weren't *you* the guy who told

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Hooker and Price to give up on them because they were already dead? If I'm no hero, what's that make you . . . pal?"

"It makes me an asshole, just like you." Hank absently picked up a light-pen and tossed it back and forth between his hands. "I don't get it, though. You knew you were about to get shit-canned, and what you did was dangerous as hell. You might have gotten *yourself* killed, for a job you didn't have anymore. So why did you even bother to try?"

"Because it was worth trying," Bruce replied. "Wasn't it, Hank?"

Luton looked up at him; he missed catching the light-pen, and it slowly tumbled across the compartment. He slowly nodded his head. "Yeah. Maybe it was, after all." he said softly. "Maybe it was."

"So. Does that still mean I'm fired?"

Hank turned his chair back around to his station and pulled the headphones over his ears. "No. Now get the hell out of here. I'm busy."

Virgin Bruce gave him a mock salute, then untucked his sneakers from the foot restraints and headed for the hatch. "One more thing," Luton said, and Bruce stopped. "Just out of curiosity . . . what does 'Ride to Live, Live to Ride' mean?"

Bruce glanced over his shoulder at him, then laughed and hauled himself out of the command center. "If you don't know by now," he called back, "don't mess with it!" ●

... SCIENTISTS PREDICT THAT SOMETIME IN THE NEXT CENTURY, BOSTON, ALONG WITH THE EASTERN SEABOARD, WILL BE UNDERWATER...
OH, NO!
OH, YES!
HEATH

OPPOSING VIEWS ON THE GREENHOUSE - EFFECT

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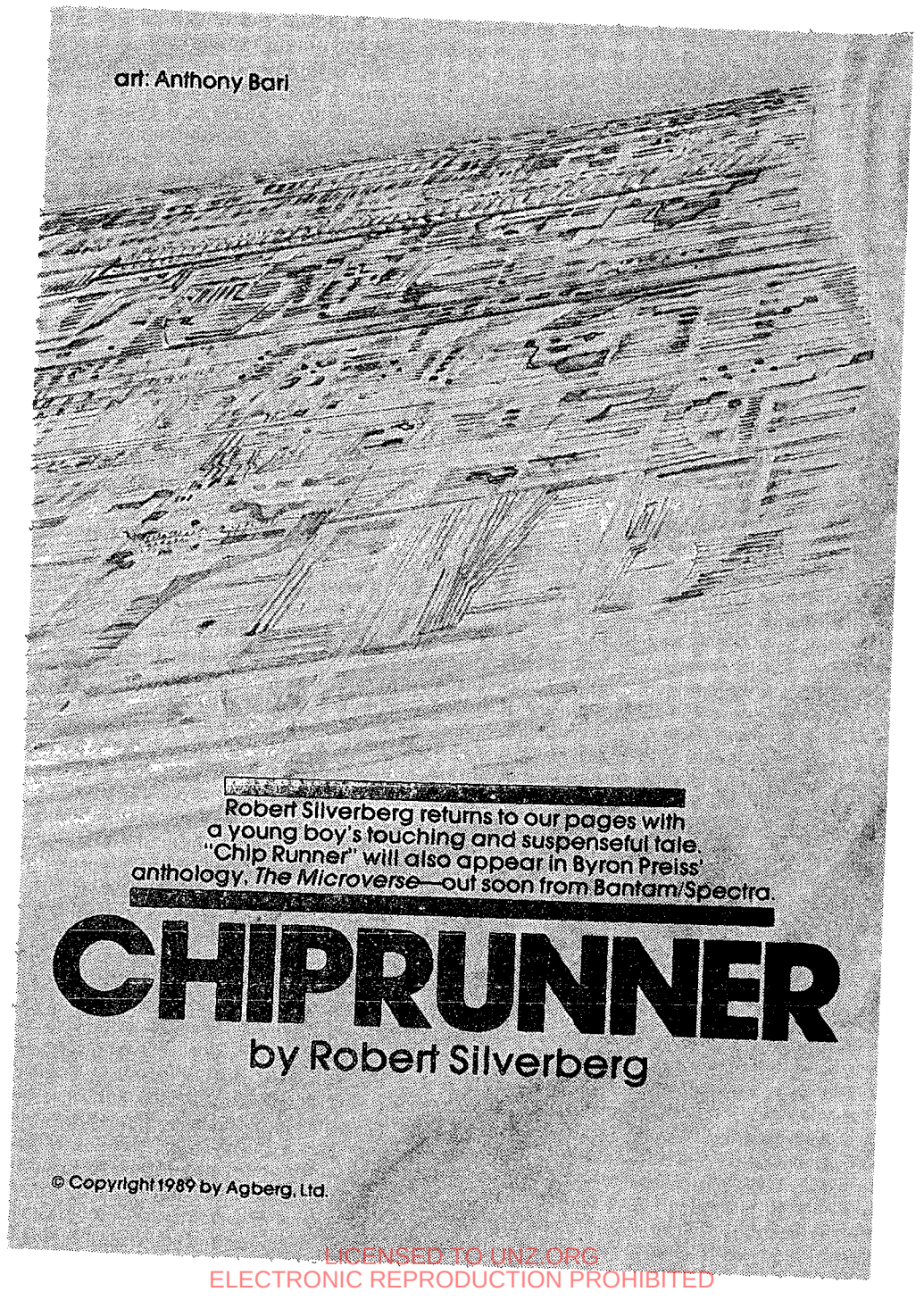

Robert Silverberg returns to our pages with a young boy's touching and suspenseful tale. "Chip Runner" will also appear in Byron Preiss' anthology, *The Microverse*—out soon from Bantam/Spectra.

CHIPRUNNER

by Robert Silverberg

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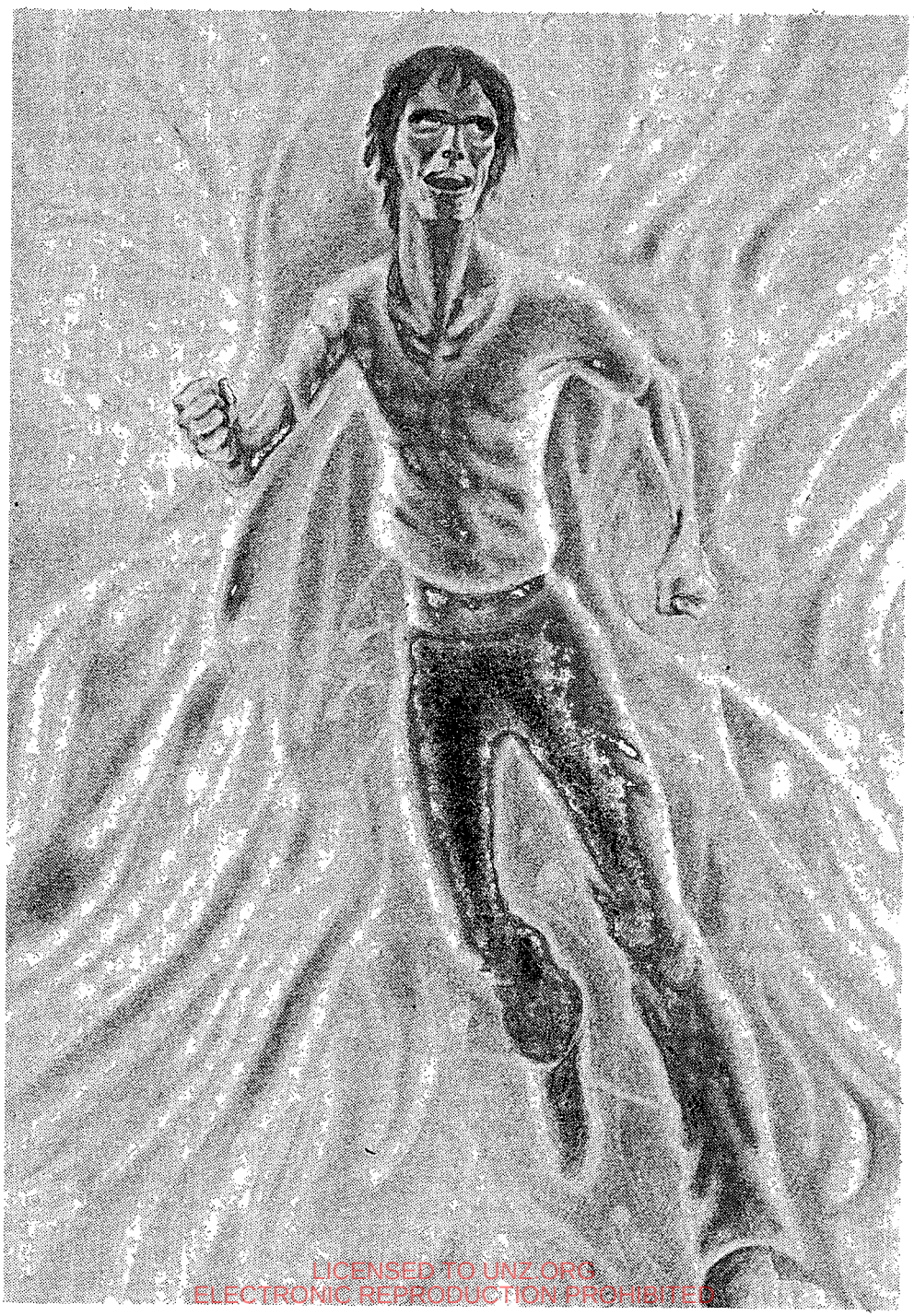

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He was fifteen, and looked about ninety, and a frail ninety at that. I knew his mother and his father, separately—they were Silicon Valley people, divorced, very important in their respective companies—and separately they had asked me to try to work with him. His skin was blue-gray and tight, drawn cruelly close over the jutting bones of his face. His eyes were gray too, and huge, and they lay deep within their sockets. His arms were like sticks. His thin lips were set in an angry grimace.

The chart before me on my desk told me that he was five feet eight inches tall and weighed seventy-one pounds. He was in his third year at one of the best private schools in the Palo Alto district. His I.Q. was 161. He crackled with intelligence and intensity. That was a novelty for me right at the outset. Most of my patients are depressed, withdrawn, uncertain of themselves, elusive, shy: virtual zombies. He wasn't anything like that. There would be other surprises ahead.

"So you're planning to go into the hardware end of the computer industry, your parents tell me," I began. The usual let's-build-a-relationship procedure.

He blew it away instantly with a single sour glare. "Is that your standard opening? 'Tell me all about your favorite hobby, my boy'? If you don't mind I'd rather skip all the bullshit, doctor, and then we can both get out of here faster. You're supposed to ask me about my eating habits."

It amazed me to see him taking control of the session this way within the first thirty seconds. I marveled at how different he was from most of the others, the poor sad wispy creatures who forced me to fish for every word.

"Actually I do enjoy talking about the latest developments in the world of computers, too," I said, still working hard at being genial.

"But my guess is you don't talk about them very often, or you wouldn't call it 'the hardware end.' Or 'the computer industry.' We don't use mundo phrases like those any more." His high thin voice sizzled with barely suppressed rage. "Come on, doctor. Let's get right down to it. You think I'm anorexic, don't you?"

"Well—"

"I know about anorexia. It's a mental disease of girls, a vanity thing. They starve themselves because they want to look beautiful and they can't bring themselves to realize that they're not too fat. Vanity isn't the issue for me. And I'm not a girl, doctor. Even you ought to be able to see that right away."

"Timothy—"

"I want to let you know right out front that I don't have an eating disorder and I don't belong in a shrink's office. I know exactly what I'm doing all the time. The only reason I came today is to get my mother off my back, because she's taken it into her head that I'm trying to starve

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myself to death. She said I had to come here and see you. So I'm here. All right?"

"All right," I said, and stood up. I am a tall man, deep-chested, very broad through the shoulders. I can loom when necessary. A flicker of fear crossed Timothy's face, which was the effect I wanted to produce. When it's appropriate for the therapist to assert authority, simpleminded methods are often the most effective. "Let's talk about eating, Timothy. What did you have for lunch today?"

He shrugged. "A piece of bread. Some lettuce."

"That's all?"

"A glass of water."

"And for breakfast?"

"I don't eat breakfast."

"But you'll have a substantial dinner, won't you?"

"Maybe some fish. Maybe not. I think food is pretty gross."

I nodded. "Could you operate your computer with the power turned off, Timothy?"

"Isn't that a pretty condescending sort of question, doctor?"

"I suppose it is. Okay, I'll be more direct. Do you think you can run your body without giving it any fuel?"

"My body runs just fine," he said, with a defiant edge.

"Does it? What sports do you play?"

"Sports?" It might have been a Martian word.

"You know, the normal weight for someone of your age and height ought to be—"

"There's nothing normal about me, doctor. Why should my weight be any more normal than the rest of me?"

"It was until last year, apparently. Then you stopped eating. Your family is worried about you, you know."

"I'll be okay," he said sullenly.

"You want to stay healthy, don't you?"

He stared at me for a long chilly moment. There was something close to hatred in his eyes, or so I imagined.

"What I want is to disappear," he said.

That night I dreamed I was disappearing. I stood naked and alone on a slab of gray metal in the middle of a vast empty plain under a sinister coppery sky and I began steadily to shrink. There is often some carryover from the office to a therapist's own unconscious life: we call it countertransference. I grew smaller and smaller. Pores appeared on the surface of the metal slab and widened into jagged craters, and then into great crevices and gullies. A cloud of luminous dust shimmered about my head. Grains of sand, specks, mere motes, now took on the aspect of immense

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boulders. Down I drifted, gliding into the darkness of a fathomless chasm. Creatures I had not noticed before hovered about me, astonishing monsters, hairy, many-legged. They made menacing gestures, but I slipped away, downward, downward, and they were gone. The air was alive now with vibrating particles, inanimate, furious, that danced in frantic zigzag patterns, veering wildly past me, now and again crashing into me, knocking my breath from me, sending me ricocheting for what seemed like miles. I was floating, spinning, tumbling with no control. Pulsating waves of blinding light pounded me. I was falling into the infinitely small, and there was no halting my descent. I would shrink and shrink and shrink until I slipped through the realm of matter entirely and was lost. A mob of contemptuous glowing things—electrons and protons, maybe, but how could I tell?—crowded close around me, emitting fizzy sparks that seemed to me like jeers and laughter. They told me to keep moving along, to get myself out of their kingdom, or I would meet a terrible death. "To see a world in a grain of sand," Blake wrote. Yes. And Eliot wrote, "I will show you fear in a handful of dust." I went on downward, and downward still. And then I awoke gasping, drenched in sweat, terrified, alone.

Normally the patient is uncommunicative. You interview parents, siblings, teachers, friends, anyone who might provide a clue or an opening wedge. Anorexia is a life-threatening matter. The patients—girls, almost always, or young women in their twenties—have lost all sense of normal body-image and feel none of the food-deprivation prompts that a normal body gives its owner. Food is the enemy. Food must be resisted. They eat only when forced to, and then as little as possible. They are unaware that they are frighteningly gaunt. Strip them and put them in front of a mirror and they will pinch their sagging empty skin to show you imaginary fatty bulges. Sometimes the process of self-skeletonization is impossible to halt, even by therapy. When it reaches a certain point the degree of organic damage becomes irreversible and the death-spiral begins.

"He was always tremendously bright," Timothy's mother said. She was fifty, a striking woman, trim, elegant, almost radiant, vice president for finance at one of the biggest Valley companies. I knew her in that familiarly involuted California way: her present husband used to be married to my first wife. "A genius, his teachers all said. But strange, you know? Moody. Dreamy. I used to think he was on drugs, though of course none of the kids do that any more." Timothy was her only child by her first marriage. "It scares me to death to watch him wasting away like that. When I see him I want to take him and shake him and force ice

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cream down his throat, pasta, milkshakes, anything. And then I want to hold him, and I want to cry."

"You'd think he'd be starting to shave by now," his father said. Technical man, working on nanoengineering projects at the Stanford AI lab. We often played racquetball together. "I was. You too, probably. I got a look at him in the shower, three or four months ago. Hasn't even reached puberty yet. Fifteen and not a hair on him. It's the starvation, isn't it? It's retarding his physical development, right?"

"I keep trying to get him to like eat something, anything," his stepbrother Mick said. "He lives with us, you know, on the weekends, and most of the time he's downstairs playing with his computers, but sometimes I can get him to go out with us, and we buy like a chili dog for him, you know, a burrito, and he goes, Thank you, thank you, and pretends to eat it, but then he throws it away when he thinks we're not looking. He is *so* weird, you know? And scary. You look at him with those ribs and all and he's like something out of a horror movie."

"What I want is to disappear," Timothy said.

He came every Tuesday and Thursday for one-hour sessions. There was at the beginning an undertone of hostility and suspicion to everything he said. I asked him, in my layman way, a few things about the latest developments in computers, and he answered me in monosyllables at first, not at all bothering to hide his disdain for my ignorance and my innocence. But now and again some question of mine would catch his interest and he would forget to be irritated, and reply at length, going on and on into realms I could not even pretend to understand. Trying to find things of that sort to ask him seemed my best avenue of approach. But of course I knew I was unlikely to achieve anything of therapeutic value if we simply talked about computers for the whole hour.

He was very guarded, as was only to be expected, when I would bring the conversation around to the topic of eating. He made it clear that his eating habits were his own business and he would rather not discuss them with me, or anyone. Yet there was an aggressive glow on his face whenever we spoke of the way he ate that called Kafka's hunger artist to my mind: he seemed proud of his achievements in starvation, even eager to be admired for his skill at shunning food.

Too much directness in the early stages of therapy is generally counterproductive where anorexia is the problem. The patient *loves* her syndrome and resists any therapeutic approach that might deprive her of it. Timothy and I talked mainly of his studies, his classmates, his stepbrothers. Progress was slow, circuitous, agonizing. What was most agonizing was my realization that I didn't have much time. According to the report from his school physician he was already running at danger-

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ously low levels, bones weakening, muscles degenerating, electrolyte balance cockeyed, hormonal systems in disarray. The necessary treatment before long would be hospitalization, not psychotherapy, and it might almost be too late even for that.

He was aware that he was wasting away and in danger. He didn't seem to care.

I let him see that I wasn't going to force anything on him. So far as I was concerned, I told him, he was basically free to starve himself to death if that was what he was really after. But as a psychologist whose role it is to help people, I said, I had some scientific interest in finding out what made him tick—not particularly for his sake, but for the sake of other patients who might be more interested in being helped. He could relate to that. His facial expressions changed. He became less hostile. It was the fifth session now, and I sensed that his armor might be ready to crack. He was starting to think of me not as a member of the enemy but as a neutral observer, a dispassionate investigator. The next step was to make him see me as an ally. You and me, Timothy, standing together against *them*. I told him a few things about myself, my childhood, my troubled adolescence: little nuggets of confidence, offered by way of trade.

"When you disappear," I said finally, "where is it that you want to go?"

The moment was ripe and the breakthrough went beyond my highest expectations.

"You know what a microchip is?" he asked.

"Sure."

"I go down into them."

Not I *want* to go down into them. But I *do* go down into them.

"Tell me about that," I said.

"The only way you can understand the nature of reality," he said, "is to take a close look at it. To really and truly take a look, you know? Here we have these fantastic chips, a whole processing unit smaller than your little toenail with fifty times the data-handling capacity of the old mainframes. What goes on inside them? I mean, what *really* goes on? I go into them and I look. It's like a trance, you know? You sharpen your concentration and you sharpen it and sharpen it and then you're moving downward, inward, deeper and deeper." He laughed harshly. "You think this is all mystical ka-ka, don't you? Half of you thinks I'm just a crazy kid mouthing off, and the other half thinks here's a kid who's smart as hell, feeding you a line of malarkey to keep you away from the real topic. Right, doctor? Right?"

"I had a dream a couple of weeks ago about shrinking down into the infinitely small," I said. "A nightmare, really. But a fascinating one.

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Fascinating and frightening both. I went all the way down to the molecular level, past grains of sand, past bacteria, down to electrons and protons, or what I suppose were electrons and protons."

"What was the light like, where you were?"

"Blinding. It came in pulsing waves."

"What color?"

"Every color all at once," I said.

He stared at me. "No shit!"

"Is that the way it looks for you?"

"Yes. No." He shifted uneasily. "How can I tell if you saw what I saw? But it's a stream of colors, yes. Pulsing. And—all the colors at once, yes, that's how you could describe it—"

"Tell me more."

"More what?"

"When you go downward—tell me what it's like, Timothy."

He gave me his lofty look, his pedagogic look. "You know how small a chip is? A MOSFET, say?"

"MOSFET?"

"Metal-oxide-silicon field-effect-transistor," he said. "The newest ones have a minimum feature size of about a micrometer. Ten to the minus sixth meters. That's a millionth of a meter, all right? Small. It isn't down there on the molecular level, no. You could fit two hundred amoebas into a MOSFET channel one micrometer long. Okay? Okay? Or a whole army of viruses. But it's still plenty small. That's where I go. And run, down the corridors of the chips, with electrons whizzing by me all the time. Of course I can't see them. Even a lot smaller, you can't see electrons, you can only compute the probabilities of their paths. But you can feel them. *I* can feel them. And I run among them, everywhere, through the corridors, through the channels, past the gates, past the open spaces in the lattice. Getting to know the territory. Feeling at home in it."

"What's an electron like, when you feel it?"

"You dreamed it, you said. You tell me."

"Sparks," I said. "Something fizzy, going by in a blur."

"You read about that somewhere, in one of your journals?"

"It's what I saw," I said. "What I felt, when I had that dream."

"But that's it! That's it exactly!" He was perspiring. His face was flushed. His hands were trembling. His whole body was ablaze with a metabolic fervor I had not previously seen in him. He looked like a skeleton who had just trotted off a basketball court after a hard game. He leaned toward me and said, looking suddenly vulnerable in a way that he had never allowed himself to seem with me before, "Are you sure it was only a dream? Or do you go there too?"

* * *

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Kafka had the right idea. What the anorexic wants is to demonstrate a supreme ability. "Look," she says. "I am a special person. I have an extraordinary gift. I am capable of exerting total control over my body. By refusing food I take command of my destiny. I display supreme force of will. Can you achieve that sort of discipline? Can you even begin to understand it? Of course you can't. But I can." The issue isn't really one of worrying about being too fat. That's just a superficial problem. The real issue is one of exhibiting strength of purpose, of proving that you can accomplish something remarkable, of showing the world what a superior person you really are. So what we're dealing with isn't merely a perversely extreme form of dieting. The deeper issue is one of gaining control—over your body, over your life, even over the physical world itself.

He began to look healthier. There was some color in his cheeks now, and he seemed more relaxed, less twitchy. I had the feeling that he was putting on a little weight, although the medical reports I was getting from his school physician didn't confirm that in any significant way—some weeks he'd be up a pound or two, some weeks down, and there was never any net gain. His mother reported that he went through periods when he appeared to be showing a little interest in food, but these were usually followed by periods of rigorous fasting or at best his typical sort of reluctant nibbling. There was nothing in any of this that I could find tremendously encouraging, but I had the definite feeling that I was starting to reach him, that I was beginning to win him back from the brink.

Timothy said, "I have to be weightless in order to get there. I mean, literally weightless. Where I am now, it's only a beginning. I need to lose all the rest."

"Only a beginning," I said, appalled, and jotted a few quick notes.

"I've attained takeoff capability. But I can never get far enough. I run into a barrier on the way down, just as I'm entering the truly structural regions of the chip."

"Yet you do get right into the interior of the chip."

"Into it, yes. But I don't attain the real understanding that I'm after. Perhaps the problem's in the chip itself, not in me. Maybe if I tried a quantum-well chip instead of a MOSFET I'd get where I want to go, but they aren't ready yet, or if they are I don't have any way of getting my hands on one. I want to ride the probability waves, do you see? I want to be small enough to grab hold of an electron and stay with it as it zooms through the lattice." His eyes were blazing. "Try talking about

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this stuff with my brother. Or anyone. The ones who don't understand think I'm crazy. So do the ones who do."

"You can talk here, Timothy."

"The chip, the integrated circuit—what we're really talking about is transistors, microscopic ones, maybe a billion of them arranged side by side. Silicon or germanium, doped with impurities like boron, arsenic, sometimes other things. On one side are the N-type charge carriers, and the P-type ones are on the other, with an insulating layer between; and when the voltage comes through the gate, the electrons migrate to the P-type side, because it's positively charged, and the holes, the zones of positive charge, go to the N-type side. So your basic logic circuit—" He paused. "You following this?"

"More or less. Tell me about what you feel as you start to go downward into a chip."

It begins, he said, with a rush, an upward surge of almost ecstatic force: he is not descending but floating. The floor falls away beneath him as he dwindles. Then comes the intensifying of perception, dust-motes quivering and twinkling in what had a moment before seemed nothing but empty air, and the light taking on strange new refractions and shimmerings. The solid world begins to alter. Familiar shapes—the table, a chair, the computer before him—vanish as he comes closer to their essence. What he sees now is detailed structure, the intricacy of surfaces: no longer a forest, only trees. Everything is texture and there is no solidity. Wood and metal become strands and webs and mazes. Canyons yawn. Abysses open. He goes inward, drifting, tossed like a feather on the molecular breeze.

It is no simple journey. The world grows grainy. He fights his way through a dust-storm of swirling granules of oxygen and nitrogen, an invisible blizzard battering him at every step. Ahead lies the chip he seeks, a magnificent thing, a gleaming radiant Valhalla. He begins to run toward it, heedless of obstacles. Giant rainbows sweep the sky: dizzying floods of pure color, hammering down with a force capable of deflecting the wandering atoms. And then—then—

The chip stands before him like some temple of Zeus rising on the Athenian plain. Giant glowing columns—yawning gateways—dark beckoning corridors—hidden sanctuaries, beyond access, beyond comprehension. It glimmers with light of many colors. A strange swelling music fills the air. He feels like an explorer taking the first stumbling steps into a lost world. And he is still shrinking. The intricacies of the chip swell, surging like metal fungi filling with water after a rain: they spring higher and higher, darkening the sky, concealing it entirely. Another level downward and he is barely large enough to manage the passage

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across the threshold, but he does, and enters. Here he can move freely. He is in a strange canyon whose silvery walls, riven with vast fissures, rise farther than he can see. He runs. He runs. He has infinite energy; his legs move like springs. Behind him the gates open, close, open, close. Rivers of torrential current surge through, lifting him, carrying him along. He senses, does not see, the vibrating of the atoms of silicon or boron; he senses, does not see, the electrons and the not-electrons flooding past, streaming toward the sides, positive or negative, to which they are inexorably drawn.

But there is more. He runs on and on and on. There is infinitely more, a world within this world, a world that lies at his feet and mocks him with its inaccessibility. It swirls before him, a whirlpool, a maelstrom. He would throw himself into it if he could, but some invisible barrier keeps him from it. This is as far as he can go. This is as much as he can achieve. He yearns to reach out as an electron goes careening past, and pluck it from its path, and stare into its heart. He wants to step inside the atoms and breathe the mysterious air within their boundaries. He longs to look upon their hidden nuclei. He hungers for the sight of mesons, quarks, neutrinos. There is more, always more, an unending series of worlds within worlds, and he is huge, he is impossibly clumsy, he is a lurching reeling mountainous titan, incapable of penetrating beyond this point—

So far, and no farther—

No farther—

He looked up at me from the far side of the desk. Sweat was streaming down his face and his light shirt was clinging to his skin. That sallow cadaverous look was gone from him entirely. He looked transfigured, aflame, throbbing with life: more alive than anyone I had ever seen, or so it seemed to me in that moment. There was a Faustian fire in his look, a world-swallowing urgency. Magellan must have looked that way sometimes, or Newton, or Galileo. And then in a moment more it was gone, and all I saw before me was a miserable scrawny boy, shrunken, feeble, pitifully frail.

I went to talk to a physicist I knew, a friend of Timothy's father who did advanced research at the university. I said nothing about Timothy to him.

"What's a quantum well?" I asked him.

He looked puzzled. "Where'd you hear of those?"

"Someone I know. But I couldn't follow much of what he was saying."

"Extremely small switching device," he said. "Experimental, maybe five, ten years away. Less if we're very lucky. The idea is that you use

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two different semiconductive materials in a single crystal lattice, a superlattice, something like a three-dimensional checkerboard. Electrons tunneling between squares could be made to perform digital operations at tremendous speeds."

"And how small would this thing be, compared with the sort of transistors they have on chips now?"

"It would be down in the nanometer range," he told me. "That's a billionth of a meter. Smaller than a virus. Getting right down there close to the theoretical limits for semiconductivity. Any smaller and you'll be measuring things in angstroms."

"Angstroms?"

"One ten-billionth of a meter. We measure the diameter of atoms in angstrom units."

"Ah," I said. "All right. Can I ask you something else?"

He looked amused, patient, tolerant.

"Does anyone know much about what an electron looks like?"

"*Looks* like?"

"Its physical appearance. I mean, has any sort of work been done on examining them, maybe even photographing them—"

"You know about the Uncertainty Principle?" he asked.

"Well—not much, really—"

"Electrons are very damned tiny. They've got a mass of—ah—about nine times ten to the minus twenty-eighth grams. We need light in order to see, in any sense of the word. We see by receiving light radiated by an object, or by hitting it with light and getting a reflection. The smallest unit of light we can use, which is the photon, has such a long wavelength that it would completely hide an electron from view, so to speak. And we can't use radiation of shorter wavelength—gammas, let's say, or x-rays—for making our measurements, either, because the shorter the wavelength the greater the energy, and so a gamma ray would simply kick any electron we were going to inspect to hell and gone. So we can't 'see' electrons. The very act of determining their position imparts new velocity to them, which alters their position. The best we can do by way of examining electrons is make an enlightened guess, a probabilistic determination, of where they are and how fast they're moving. In a very rough way that's what we mean by the Uncertainty Principle."

"You mean, in order to look an electron in the eye, you'd virtually have to be the size of an electron yourself? Or even smaller?"

He gave me a strange look. "I suppose that question makes sense," he said. "And I suppose I could answer yes to it. But what the hell are we talking about, now?"

I dreamed again that night: a feverish, disjointed dream of gigantic

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grotesque creatures shining with a fluorescent glow against a sky blacker than any night. They had claws, tentacles, eyes by the dozens. Their swollen asymmetrical bodies were bristling with thick red hairs. Some were clad in thick armor, others were equipped with ugly shining spikes that jutted in rows of ten or twenty from their quivering skins. They were pursuing me through the airless void. Wherever I ran there were more of them, crowding close. Behind them I saw the walls of the cosmos beginning to shiver and flow. The sky itself was dancing. Color was breaking through the blackness: eddying bands of every hue at once, interwoven like great chains. I ran, and I ran, and I ran, but there were monsters on every side, and no escape.

Timothy missed an appointment. For some days now he had been growing more distant, often simply sitting silently, staring at me for the whole hour out of some hermetic sphere of unapproachability. That struck me as nothing more than predictable passive-aggressive resistance, but when he failed to show up at all I was startled: such blatant rebellion wasn't his expectable mode. Some new therapeutic strategies seemed in order: more direct intervention, with me playing the role of a gruff, loving older brother, or perhaps family therapy, or some meetings with his teachers and even classmates. Despite his recent aloofness I still felt I could get to him in time. But this business of skipping appointments was unacceptable. I phoned his mother the next day, only to learn that he was in the hospital; and after my last patient of the morning I drove across town to see him. The attending physician, a chunky-faced resident, turned frosty when I told him that I was Timothy's therapist, that I had been treating him for anorexia. I didn't need to be telepathic to know that he was thinking, *You didn't do much of a job with him, did you?* "His parents are with him now," he told me. "Let me find out if they want you to go in. It looks pretty bad."

Actually they were all there, parents, step-parents, the various children by the various second marriages. Timothy seemed to be no more than a waxen doll. They had brought him books, tapes, even a lap-top computer, but everything was pushed to the corners of the bed. The shrunken figure in the middle barely raised the level of the coverlet a few inches. They had him on an IV unit and a whole webwork of other lines and cables ran to him from the array of medical machines surrounding him. His eyes were open, but he seemed to be staring into some other world, perhaps that same world of rampaging bacteria and quivering molecules that had haunted my sleep a few nights before. He seemed perhaps to be smiling.

"He collapsed at school," his mother whispered.

"In the computer lab, no less," said his father, with a nervous ratcheting

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laugh. "He was last conscious about two hours ago, but he wasn't talking coherently."

"He wants to go inside his computer," one of the little boys said. "That's crazy, isn't it?" He might have been seven.

"Timothy's going to die, Timothy's going to die," chanted somebody's daughter, about seven.

"Christopher! Bree! Shhh, both of you!" said about three of the various parents, all at once.

I said, "Has he started to respond to the IV?"

"They don't think so. It's not at all good," his mother said. "He's right on the edge. He lost three pounds this week. We thought he was eating, but he must have been sliding the food into his pocket, or something like that." She shook her head. "You can't be a policeman."

Her eyes were cold. So were her husband's, and even those of the stepparents. Telling me, *This is your fault, we counted on you to make him stop starving himself.* What could I say? You can only heal the ones you can reach. Timothy had been determined to keep himself beyond my grasp. Still, I felt the keenness of their reproachful anger, and it hurt.

"I've seen worse cases than this come back under medical treatment," I told them. "They'll build up his strength until he's capable of talking with me again. And then I'm certain I'll be able to lick this thing. I was just beginning to break through his defenses when—when he—"

Sure. It costs no more to give them a little optimism. I gave them what I could: experience with other cases of food deprivation, positive results following a severe crisis of this nature, et cetera, et cetera, the man of science dipping into his reservoir of experience. They all began to brighten as I spoke. They even managed to convince themselves that a little color was coming into Timothy's cheeks, that he was stirring, that he might soon be regaining consciousness as the machinery surrounding him pumped the nutrients into him that he had so conscientiously forbidden himself to have.

"Look," this one said, or that one. "Look how he's moving his hands! Look how he's breathing. It's better, isn't it!"

I actually began to believe it myself.

But then I heard his dry thin voice echoing in the caverns of my mind. *I can never get far enough. I have to be weightless in order to get there. Where I am now, it's only a beginning. I need to lose all the rest.*

I want to disappear.

That night, a third dream, vivid, precise, concrete. I was falling and running at the same time, my legs pistoning like those of a marathon runner in the twenty-sixth mile, while simultaneously I dropped in free fall through airless dark toward the silver-black surface of some distant

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world. And fell and fell, in utter weightlessness, and hit the surface easily and kept on running, moving not forward but downward, the atoms of the ground parting for me as I ran. I became smaller as I descended, and smaller yet, and even smaller, until I was a mere phantom, a running ghost, the bodiless idea of myself. And still I went downward toward the dazzling heart of things, shorn now of all impediments of the flesh.

I phoned the hospital the next morning. Timothy had died a little after dawn.

Did I fail with him? Well, then, I failed. But I think no one could possibly have succeeded. He went where he wanted to go; and so great was the force of his will that any attempts at impeding him must have seemed to him like the mere buzzings of insects, meaningless, insignificant.

So now his purpose is achieved. He has shed his useless husk. He has gone on, floating, running, descending: downward, inward, toward the core, where knowledge is absolute and uncertainty is unknown. He is running amongst the shining electrons, now. He is down there among the angstrom units at last. ●

NEXT ISSUE

Well, it's *that* time of the year again, and, of course, it wouldn't be the December issue without a Christmas story. So next month we feature *two* of them—both rather unusual. First up, **Jack McDevitt** takes us far across the Galaxy to a distant alien planet, and shows us how a strange epiphany is generated in the hearts of a crisis-haunted scientific exploration team by an encounter with some enigmatic "Tracks." Then Nebula-and World Fantasy Award-winner **Gene Wolfe** takes us to a barren, storm-lashed little island off the winter coast of Ireland for a bone-chilling Christmas ghost story, "How the Bishop Sailed To Inniskeen."

We turn away from seasonal themes for the rest of our December issue (although several stories do feature wintry locales): Nebula-and World Fantasy Award-winner **Kim Stanley Robinson** returns with a novella which shares some characters in common—although it's not quite a sequel—with Robinson's immensely popular stories "Escape From Kathmandu" and "Mother Goddess of the World;" this one a wild, fast-paced screwball comedy that explores "The True Nature of Shangri-La"; new writer **R. Garcia y Robertson** makes his *IAsfm* debut, taking us back to Viking times and to the snow-bound depths of rural Sweden to show us a converted Christian's hair-raising encounter with That Old-Time Religion, in "The Wagon God's Wife"; Campbell Award-winner **Judith Moffett** parts the Veils of Time for a poignant glimpse of the future, in "Remembrance of Things Future"; **Gregory Frost** returns to take us to an altered Old Vienna for a disturbing "Divertimento" that will leave the hairs prickling on the back of your neck; new writer **Aaron Schutz** makes his *IAsfm* debut with a look at a little boy's melancholy encounter with something very large indeed, in "Small"; and Campbell Award-winner **Karen Joy Fowler** returns after too long an absence, taking us deep into the South American jungle for a vivid look at some intricate and subtle "Duplicity." Plus an array of columns and features. Look for the December issue on sale on your newsstands on October 17.1989.

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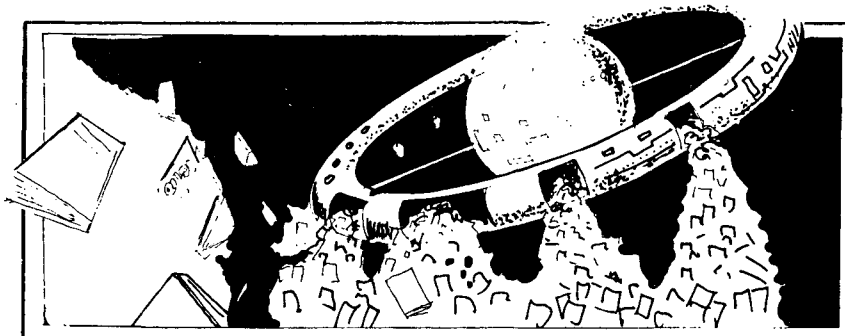

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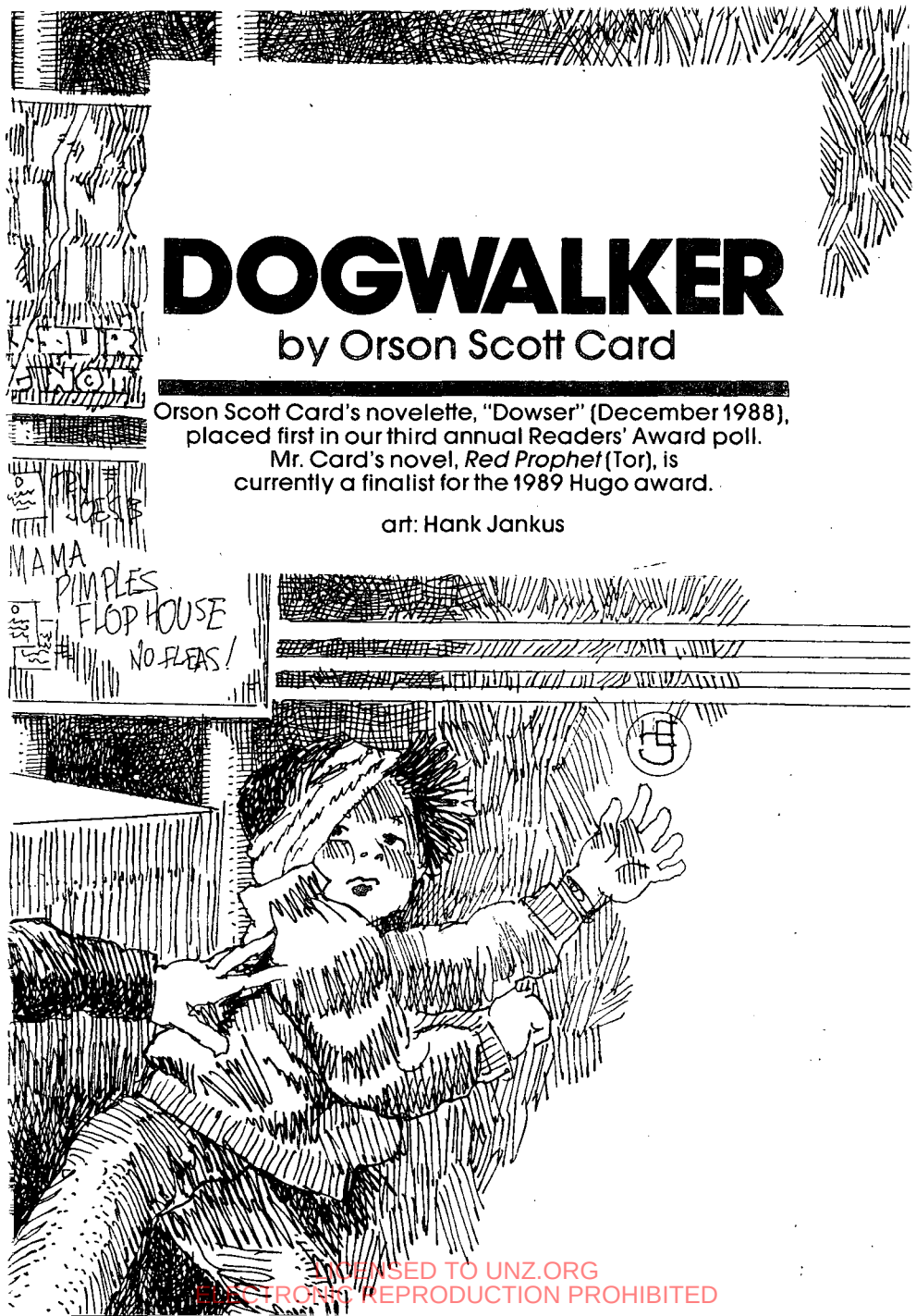
DOGWALKER

by Orson Scott Card

Orson Scott Card's novelette, "Dowser" (December 1988), placed first in our third annual Readers' Award poll. Mr. Card's novel, *Red Prophet* (Tor), is currently a finalist for the 1989 Hugo award.

art: Hank Jankus



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I was an innocent pedestrian. Only reason I got in this in the first place was I got a vertical way of thinking and Dogwalker thought I might be useful, which was true, and also he said I might enjoy myself, which was a prefabrication, since people done a lot more enjoying on me than I done on them.

When I say I think vertical, I mean to say I'm metaphysical, that is, simular, which is to say, I'm dead but my brain don't know it yet and my feet still move. I got popped at age nine just lying in my own bed when the goat next door shot at his lady and it went through the wall and into my head. Everybody went to look at them cause they made all the noise, so I was a quart low before nobody noticed I been poked.

They packed my head with supergoo and light pipe, but they didn't know which neutron was supposed to butt into the next so my alchemical brain got turned from rust to diamond. Goo Boy. The Crystal Kid.

From that bright electrical day I never grew another inch, anywhere. Bullet went nowhere near my gonadicals. Just turned off the puberty switch in my head. Saint Paul said he was a eunuch for Jesus, but who am I a eunuch for?

Worst thing about it is here I am near thirty and I still have to take barkeepers to court before they'll sell me beer. And it ain't hardly worth it even though the judge prints out in my favor and the barkeep has to pay costs, because my corpse is so little I get toxed on six ounces and pass out pissing after twelve. I'm a lousy drinking buddy. Besides, anybody hangs out with me looks like a pederast.

No, I'm not trying to make you drippy-drop for me—I'm used to it, okay? Maybe the homecoming queen never showed me True Love in a four-point spread, but I got this knack that certain people find real handy and so I always made out. I dress good and I ride the worm and I don't pay much income tax. Because I am the Password Man. Give me five minutes with anybody's curriculum vitae, which is to say their autopsychoscopy, and nine times out of ten I'll spit out their password and get you into their most nasty sticky sweet secret files. Actually it's usually more like three times out of ten, but that's still a lot better odds than having a computer spend a year trying to push out fifteen characters to make just the right P-word, specially since after the third wrong try they string your phone number, freeze the target files, and call the dongs.

Oh, do I make you sick? A cute little boy like me, engaged in critical unspecified dispopulative behaviors? I may be half glass and four feet high, but I can simulate you better than your own mama, and the better I know you, the deeper my hooks. I not only know your password *now,* I can write a word on a paper, seal it up, and then you go home and *change* your password and then open up what I wrote and there it'll be, your *new* password, three times out of ten. I am *vertical,* and Dogwalker

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knowed it. Ten percent more supergoo and I wouldn't even be legally human, but I'm still under the line, which is more than I can say for a lot of people who are a hundred percent zoo inside their head.

Dogwalker comes to me one day at Carolina Circle, where I'm playing pinball standing on a stool. He didn't say nothing, just gave me a shove, so naturally he got my elbow in his balls. I get a lot of twelve-year-olds trying to shove me around at the arcades, so I'm used to teaching them lessons. Jack the Giant Killer. Hero of the fourth graders. I usually go for the stomach, only Dogwalker wasn't a twelve-year-old, so my elbow hit low.

I knew the second I hit him that this wasn't no kid. I didn't know Dogwalker from God, but he gots the look, you know, like he been hungry before, and he don't care what he eats these days.

Only he got no ice and he got no slice, just sits there on the floor with his back up against the Eat Shi'ite game, holding his boodle and looking at me like I was a baby he had to diaper. "I hope you're Goo Boy," he says, "cause if you ain't, I'm gonna give you back to your mama in three little tupperware bowls." He doesn't sound like he's making a threat, though. He sounds like he's chief weeper at his own funeral.

"You want to do business, use your mouth, not your hands," I says. Only I say it real apoplectic, which is the same as apologetic except you are also still pissed.

"Come with me," he says. "I got to go buy me a truss. You pay the tax out of your allowance."

So we went to Ivey's and stood around in children's wear while he made his pitch. "One P-word," he says, "only there can't be no mistake. If there's a mistake, a guy loses his job and maybe goes to jail."

So I told him no. Three chances in ten, that's the best I can do. No guarantees. My record speaks for itself, but nobody's perfect, and I ain't even close.

"Come on," he says, "you got to have ways to make sure, right? If you can do three times out of ten, what if you find out more about the guy? What if you meet him?"

"Okay, maybe fifty-fifty."

"Look, we can't go back for seconds. So maybe you can't get it. But do you *know* when you ain't got it?"

"Maybe half the time when I'm wrong, I know I'm wrong."

"So we got three out of four that you'll know whether you got it?"

"No," says I. "Cause half the time when I'm right, I don't know I'm right."

"Shee-it," he says. "This is like doing business with my baby brother."

"You can't afford me anyway," I says. "I pull two dimes minimum, and you barely got breakfast on your gold card."

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"I'm offering a cut."

"I don't want a cut. I want cash."

"Sure thing," he says. He looks around, real careful. As if they wired the sign that said Boys Briefs Sizes 10-12. "I got an inside man at Federal Coding," he says.

"That's nothing," I says. "I got a bug up the First Lady's ass, and forty hours on tape of her breaking wind."

I got a mouth. I know I got a mouth. I especially know it when he jams my face into a pile of shorts and says, "Suck on this, Goo Boy."

I hate it when people push me around. And I know ways to make them stop. This time all I had to do was cry. Real loud, like he was hurting me. Everybody looks when a kid starts crying. "I'll be good." I kept saying it. "Don't hurt me no more! I'll be good."

"Shut up," he says. "Everybody's looking."

"Don't you ever shove me around again," I says. "I'm at least ten years older than you, and a hell of a lot more than ten years smarter. Now I'm leaving this store, and if I see you coming after me, I'll start screaming about how you zipped down and showed me the pope, and you'll get yourself a child-molesting tag so they pick you up every time some kid gets jollied within a hundred miles of Greensboro." I've done it before, and it works, and Dogwalker was no dummy. Last thing he needed was extra reasons for the dongs to bring him in for questioning. So I figured he'd tell me to get poked and that'd be the last of it.

Instead he says, "Goo Boy, I'm sorry, I'm too quick with my hands."

Even the goat who shot me never said he was sorry. My first thought was, what kind of sister is he, abjectifying right out like that. Then I reckoned I'd stick around and see what kind of man it is who emulsifies himself in front of a nine-year-old-looking kid. Not that I figured him to be purely sorrowful. He still just wanted me to get the P-word for him, and he knew there wasn't nobody else to do it. But most street pugs aren't smart enough to tell the right lie under pressure. Right away I knew he wasn't your ordinary street hook or low arm, pugging cause they don't have the sense to stick with any kind of job. He had a deep face, which is to say his head was more than a hairball, by which I mean he had brains enough to put his hands in his pockets without seeking an audience with the pope. Right then was when I decided he was my kind of no-good lying son-of-a-bitch.

"What are you after at Federal Coding?" I asked him. "A record wipe?"

"Ten clean greens," he says. "Coded for unlimited international travel. The whole i.d., just like a real person."

"The President has a green card," I says. "The Joint Chiefs have clean greens. But that's all. The U.S. Vice-President isn't even cleared for unlimited international travel."

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"Yes he is," he says.

"Oh, yeah, you know everything."

"I need a P. My guy could do us reds and blues, but a clean green has to be done by a burr-oak rat two levels up. My guy knows how it's done."

"They won't just have it with a P-Word," I says. "A guy who can make green cards, they're going to have his finger on it."

"I know how to get the finger," he says. "It takes the finger and the password."

"You take a guy's finger, he might report it. And even if you persuade him not to, sombody's gonna notice that it's gone."

"Latex," he says. "We'll get a mold. And don't start telling me how to do my part of the job. You get P-words, I get fingers. You in?"

"Cash," I says.

"Twenty percent," says he.

"Twenty percent of pus."

"The inside guy gets twenty, the girl who brings me the finger, she gets twenty, and I damn well get forty."

"You can't just sell these things on the street, you know."

"They're worth a meg apiece," says he, "to certain buyers." By which he meant Orkish Crime, of course. Sell ten, and my twenty percent grows up to be two megs. Not enough to be rich, but enough to retire from public life and maybe even pay for some high-level medicals to sprout hair on my face. I got to admit that sounded good to me.

So we went into business. For a few hours he tried to do it without telling me the baroque rat's name, just giving me data he got from his guy at Federal Coding. But that was real stupid, giving me second-hand face like that, considering he needed me to be a hundred percent sure, and pretty soon he realized that and brought me in all the way. He hated telling me anything, because he couldn't stand to let go. Once I knew stuff on my own, what was to stop me from trying to go into business for myself? But unless he had another way to get the P-word, he had to get it from me, and for me to do it right, I had to know everything I could. Dogwalker's got a brain in his head, even if it is all biodegradable, and so he knows there's times when you got no choice but to trust somebody. When you just got to figure they'll do their best even when they're out of your sight.

He took me to his cheap condo on the old Guilford College campus, near the worm, which was real congenital for getting to Charlotte or Winston or Raleigh with no fuss. He didn't have no soft floor, just a bed, but it was a big one, so I didn't reckon he suffered. Maybe he bought it back in his old pimping days, I figured, back when he got his name, running a string of bitches with names like Spike and Bowser and Prince, real hydrant leg-lifters for the tweeze trade. I could see that he used to

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have money, and he didn't anymore. Lots of great clothes, tailor-tight fit, but shabby, out of sync. The really old ones, he tore all the wiring out, but you could still see where the diodes used to light up. We're talking neanderthal.

"Vanity, vanity, all is profanity," says I, while I'm holding out the sleeve of a camisa that used to light up like an airplane coming in for a landing.

"They're too comfortable to get rid of," he says. But there's a twist in his voice so I know he don't plan to fool nobody.

"Let this be a lesson to you," says I. "This is what happens when a walker don't walk."

"Walkers do steady work," says he. "But me, when business was good, it felt bad, and when business was bad, it felt good. You walk cats, maybe you can take some pride in it. But you walk dogs, and you know they're getting hurt every time—"

"They got a built-in switch, they don't feel a thing. That's why the dongs don't touch you, walking dogs, cause nobody gets hurt."

"Yeah, so tell me, which is worse, somebody getting tweezed till they scream so some old honk can pop his pimple, or somebody getting half their brain replaced so when the old honk tweezes her she can't feel a thing? I had these women's bodies around me and I knew that they used to be people."

"You can be glass," says I, "and still be people."

He saw I was taking it personally. "Oh hey," says he, "you're under the line."

"So are dogs," says I.

"Yeah well," says he. "You watch a girl come back and tell about some of the things they done to her, and she's *laughing,* you draw your own line."

I look around his shabby place. "Your choice," says I.

"I wanted to feel clean," says he. "That don't mean I got to stay poor."

"So you're setting up this grope so you can return to the old days of peace and propensity."

"Propensity," says he. "What the hell kind of word is that? Why do you keep using words like that?"

"Cause I know them," says I.

"Well you *don't* know them," says he, "because half the time you get them wrong."

I showed him my best little-boy grin. "I know," says I. What I don't tell him is that the fun comes from the fact that almost nobody ever *knows* I'm using them wrong. Dogwalker's no ordinary pimp. But then the ordinary pimp doesn't bench himself halfway through the game because of a sprained moral qualm, by which I mean that Dogwalker had

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some stray diagonals in his head, and I began to think it might be fun to see where they all hooked up.

Anyway we got down to business. The target's name was Jesse H. Hunt, and I did a real job on him. The Crystal Kid really plugged in on this one. Dogwalker had about two pages of stuff—date of birth, place of birth, sex at birth (no changes since), education, employment history. It was like getting an armload of empty boxes. I just laughed at it. "You got a jack to the city library?" I asked him, and he shows me the wall outlet. I plugged right in, visual onto my pocket sony, with my own little crystal head for ee-i-ee-i-oh. Not every goo-head can think clear enough to do this, you know, put out clean type just by thinking the right stuff out my left ear interface port.

I showed Dogwalker a little bit about research. Took me ten minutes. I know my way right through the Greensboro Public Library. I have P-words for every single librarian and I'm so ept that they don't even guess I'm stepping upstream through their access channels. From the Public Library you can get all the way into North Carolina Records Division in Raleigh, and from there you can jumble into federal personnel records anywhere in the country. Which meant that by nightfall on that most portentous day we had hardcopy of every document in Jesse H. Hunt's whole life, from his birth certificate and first grade report card to his medical history and security clearance reports when he first worked for the feds.

Dogwalker knew enough to be impressed. "If you can do all that," he says, "you might as well pug his P-word straight out."

"No puedo, putz," says I as cheerful as can be. "Think of the fed as a castle. Personnel files are floating in the moat—there's a few alligators but I swim real good. Hot data is deep in the dungeon. You can get in there, but you can't get out clean. And P-words—P-words are kept up the queen's ass."

"No system is unbeatable," he says.

"Where'd you learn that, from graffiti in a toilet stall? If the P-word system was even a little bit breakable, Dogwalker, the gentlemen you plan to sell these cards to would already be inside looking out at us, and they wouldn't need to spend a meg to get clean greens from a street pug."

Trouble was that after impressing Dogwalker with all the stuff I could find out about Jesse H., I didn't know that much more than before. Oh, I could guess at some P-words, but that was all it was—guessing. I couldn't even pick a P most likely to succeed. Jesse was one ordinary dull rat. Regulation good grades in school, regulation good evaluations on the job, probably gave his wife regulation lube jobs on a weekly schedule.

"You don't really think your girl's going to get his finger," says I with sickening scorn.

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"You don't know the girl," says he. "If we needed his flipper she'd get molds in five sizes."

"You don't know this guy," says I. "This is the straightest opie in Mayberry. I don't see him cheating on his wife."

"Trust me," says Dogwalker. "She'll get his finger so smooth he won't even know she took the mold."

I didn't believe him. I got a knack for knowing things about people, and Jesse H. wasn't faking. Unless he started faking when he was five, which is pretty unpopulated. He wasn't going to bounce the first pretty girl who made his zipper tight. Besides which he was smart. His career path showed that he was always in the right place. The right people always seemed to know his name. Which is to say he isn't the kind whose brain can't run if his jeans get hot. I said so.

"You're really a marching band," says Dogwalker. "You can't tell me his P-word, but you're obliquely sure that he's a limp or a wimp."

"Neither one," says I. "He's hard and straight. But a girl starts rubbing up to him, he isn't going to think it's because she heard that his crotch is cantilevered. He's going to figure she wants something, and he'll give her string till he finds out what."

He just grinned at me. "I got me the best Password Man in the Triass, didn't I? I got me a miracle worker named Goo-Boy, didn't I? The ice-brain they call Crystal Kid. I got him, didn't I?"

"Maybe," says I.

"I got him or I kill him," he says, showing more teeth than a primate's supposed to have.

"You got me," says I. "But don't go thinking you can kill me."

He just laughs. "I got you and you're so good, you can bet I got me a girl who's at least as good at what she does."

"No such," says I.

"Tell me his P-word and then I'll be impressed."

"You want quick results? Then go ask him to give you his password himself."

Dogwalker isn't one of those guys who can hide it when he's mad. "I want quick results," he says. "And if I start thinking you can't deliver, I'll pull your tongue out of your head. Through your nose."

"Oh, that's good," says I. "I always do my best thinking when I'm being physically threatened by a client. You really know how to bring out the best in me."

"I don't want to bring out the best," he says. "I just want to bring out his password."

"I got to meet him first," says I.

He leans over me so I can smell his musk, which is to say I'm very olfactory and so I can tell you he reeked of testosterone, by which I mean

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ladies could fill up with babies just from sniffing his sweat. "Meet him?" he asks me. "Why don't we just ask him to fill out a job application?"

"I've read all his job applications," says I.

"How's a glass-head like you going to meet Mr. Fed?" says he. "I bet you're always getting invitations to the same parties as guys like him."

"I don't get invited to *grown-up* parties," says I. "But on the other hand, grown-ups don't pay much attention to sweet little kids like me."

He sighed. "You really have to meet him?"

"Unless fifty-fifty on a P-word is good enough odds for you."

All of a sudden he goes nova. Slaps a glass off the table and it breaks against the wall, and then he kicks the table over, and all the time I'm thinking about ways to get out of there unkilled. But it's me he's doing the show for, so there's no way I'm leaving, and he leans in close to me and screams in my face. "That's the last of your fifty-fifty and sixty-forty and three times in ten I want to hear about, Goo Boy, you hear me?"

And I'm talking real meek and sweet, cause this boy's twice my size and three times my weight and I don't exactly have no leverage. So I says to him, "I can't help talking in odds and percentages, Dogwalker, I'm vertical, remember? I've got glass channels in here, they spit out percentages as easy as other people sweat."

He slapped his hand against his own head. "This ain't exactly a sausage biscuit, either, but you know and I know that when you give me all them *ex*act numbers it's all guesswork anyhow. You don't know the odds on this beakrat anymore than I do."

"I don't know the odds on *him,* Walker, but I know the odds on *me.* I'm sorry you don't like the way I sound so precise, but my crystal memory has every P-word I ever plumbed, which is to say I can give you exact to the third decimal percentages on when I hit it right on the first try after meeting the subject, and how many times I hit it right on the first try just from his curriculum vitae, and right now if I don't meet him and I go on just what I've got here you have a 48.838 percent chance I'll be right on my P-word first time and a 66.667 chance I'll be right with one out of three."

Well that took him down, which was fine I must say because he loosened up my sphincters with that glass-smashing table-tossing hot-breath-in-my-face routine he did. He stepped back and put his hands in his pockets and leaned against the wall. "Well I chose the right P-man, then, didn't I," he says, but he doesn't smile, no, he *says* the back-down words but his eyes don't back down, his eyes say don't try to flash my face because I see through you, I got most excellent inward shades all polarized to keep out your glitz and see you straight and clear. I never saw eyes like that before. Like he knew me. Nobody ever knew me, and I didn't think he *really* knew me either, but I didn't like him looking at

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me as if he *thought* he knew me cause the fact is *I* didn't know me all that well and it worried me to think he might know me better than I did, if you catch my drift.

"All I have to do is be a little lost boy in a store," I says.

"What if he isn't the kind who helps little lost boys?"

"Is he the kind who lets them cry?"

"I don't know. What if he is? What then? Think you can get away with meeting him a second time?"

"So the lost boy in the store won't work. I can crash my bicycle on his front lawn. I can try to sell him cable magazines."

But he was ahead of me already. "For the cable magazines he slams the door in your face, if he even comes to the door at all. For the bicycle crash, you're out of your little glass brain. I got my inside girl working on him right now, very complicated, because he's not the playing around kind, so she has to make this a real emotional come-on, like she's breaking up with a boyfriend and he's the only shoulder she can cry on, and his wife is so lucky to have a man like him. This much he can believe. But then suddenly he has this little boy crashing in his yard, and because he's paranoid, he begins to wonder if some weird rain isn't falling, right? I know he's paranoid because you don't get to his level in the fed without you know how to watch behind you and kill the enemy even before *they* know they're out to get you. So he even suspects, for one instant, that somebody's setting him up for something, and what does he do?"

I knew what Dogwalker was getting at now, and he was right, and so I let him have his victory and I let the words he wanted march out all in a row. "He changes all his passwords, all his habits, and watches over his shoulder all the time."

"And my little project turns into compost. No clean greens."

So I saw for the first time why this street boy, this ex-pimp, why he was the one to do this job. He wasn't vertical like me, and he didn't have the inside hook like his fed boy, and he didn't have bumps in his sweater so he couldn't do the girl part, but he had eyes in his elbows, ears in his knees, by which I mean he noticed everything there was to notice and then he thought of new things that weren't even noticeable yet and noticed them. He earned his forty percent. And he earned part of my twenty, too.

Now while we waited around for the girl to fill Jesse's empty aching arms and get a finger off him, and while we were still working on how to get me to meet him slow and easy and sure, I spent a lot of time with Dogwalker. Not that he ever asked me, but I found myself looping his bus route every morning till he picked me up, or I'd be eating at Bojangle's when he came in to throw cajun chicken down into his ulcerated organs. I watched to make sure he didn't mind, cause I didn't want to piss this

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boy, having once beheld the majesty of his wrath, but if he wanted to shiver me he gave me no shiv.

Even after a few days, when the ghosts of the cold hard street started haunting us, he didn't shake me, and that includes when Bellbottom says to him, "Looks like you stopped walking dogs. Now you pimping little boys, right? Little catamites, we call you Catwalker now, that so? Or maybe you just keep him for private use, is that it? You be Boypoker now?" Well like I always said, someday somebody's going to kill Bellbottom just to flay him and use his skin for a convertible roof, but Dogwalker just waved and walked on by while I made little pissy bumps at Bell. Most people shake me right off when they start getting splashed on about liking little boys, but Doggy, he didn't say we were friends or nothing, but he didn't give me no Miami howdy, neither, which is to say I didn't find myself floating in the Bermuda Triangle with my ass pulled down around my ankles, by which I mean he wasn't ashamed to be seen with me on the street, which don't sound like a six-minute orgasm to you but to me it was like a breeze in August, I didn't ask for it and I don't trust it to last but as long as it's there I'm going to like it.

How I finally got to meet Jesse H. was dervish, the best I ever thought of. Which made me wonder why I never thought of it before, except that I never before had Dogwalker like a parrot saying "stupid idea" every time I thought of something. By the time I finally got a plan that he didn't say "stupid idea," I was almost drowned in the deepest lightholes of my lucidity. I mean I was going at a hundred watts by the time I satisfied him.

First we found out who did babysitting for them when Jesse H. and Mrs. Jesse went out on the town (which for Nice People in G-boro means walking around the mall wishing there was something to do and then taking a piss in the public john). They had two regular teenage girls who usually came over and ignored their children for a fee, but when these darlettes were otherwise engaged, which meant they had a contract to get squeezed and poked by some half-zipped boy in exchange for a humbuger and a vid, they called upon Mother Hubbard's Homecare Hotline. So I most carefully assinuated myself into Mother Hubbard's estimable organization by passing myself off as a lamentably prepubic fourteen-year-old, specializing in the northwest section of town and on into the county. All this took a week, but Walker was in no hurry. Take the time to do it right, he said, if we hurry somebody's going to notice the blur of motion and look our way and just by looking at us they'll undo us. A horizontal mind that boy had.

Came a most delicious night when the Hunts went out to play, and both their diddle-girls were busy being squeezed most delectably (and didn't we have a lovely time persuading two toddle-boys to do the squeez-

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ing that very night). This news came to Mr. and Mrs. Jesse at the very last minute, and they had no choice but to call Mother Hubbard's, and isn't it lovely that just a half hour before, sweet little Stevie Queen, being moi, called in and said that he was available for baby-stomping after all. Ein and ein made zwei, and there I was being dropped off by a Mother Hubbard driver at the door of the Jesse Hunt house, whereupon I not only got to look upon the beatific face of Mr. Fed himself, I also got to have my dear head patted by Mrs. Fed, and then had the privilege of preparing little snacks for fussy Fed Jr. and foul-mouthed Fedene, the five-year-old and the three-year-old, while Microfed, the one-year-old (not yet human and, if I am any judge of character, not likely to live long enough to become such) sprayed uric acid in my face while I was diapering him. A good time was had by all.

Because of my heroic efforts, the small creatures were in their truckle beds quite early, and being a most fastidious baby-tucker, I browsed the house looking for burglars and stumbling, quite by chance, upon the most useful information about the beak-rat whose secret self-chosen name I was trying to learn. For one thing, he had set a watchful hair upon each of his bureau drawers, so that if I had been inclined to steal, he would know that unlawful access of his drawers had been attempted. I learned that he and his wife had separate containers of everything in the bathroom, even when they used the same brand of toothpaste, and it was he, not she, who took care of all their prophylactic activities (and not a moment too soon, thought I, for I had come to know their children). He was not the sort to use lubrificants or little pleasure-giving ribs, either. Only the regulation government-issue hard-as-concrete rubber rafts for him, which suggested to my most pernicious mind that he had almost as much fun between the sheets as me.

I learned all kinds of joyful information, all of it trivial, all of it vital. I never know which of the threads I grasp are going to make connections deep within the lumens of my brightest caves. But I never before had the chance to wander unmolested through a person's own house when searching for his P-word. I saw the notes his children brought home from school, the magazines his family received, and more and more I began to see that Jesse H. Hunt barely touched his family at any point. He stood like a waterbug on the surface of life, without ever getting his feet wet. He could die, and if nobody tripped over the corpse it would be weeks before they noticed. And yet this was not because he did not care. It was because he was so very very careful. He examined everything, but through the wrong end of the microscope, so that it all became very small and far away. I was a sad little boy by the end of that night, and I whispered to Microfed that he should practice pissing in male faces,

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because that's the only way he would ever sink a hook into his daddy's face.

"What if he wants to take you home?" Dogwalker asked me, and I said, "No way he would, nobody does that," but Dogwalker made sure I had a place to go all the same, and sure enough, it was Doggy who got voltage and me who went limp. I ended up riding in a beak-rat buggy, a genuine made-in-America rattletrap station wagon, and he took me to the for-sale house where Mama Pimple was waiting crossly for me and made Mr. Hunt go away because he kept me out too late. Then when the door was closed Mama Pimple giggled her gig and chuckled her chuck, and Walker himself wandered out of the back room and said, "That's one less favor you owe me, Mama Pimple," and she said, "No, my dear boyoh, that's one more favor *you* owe *me*" and then they kissed a deep passionate kiss if you can believe it. Did you imagine anybody ever kissed Mama Pimple that way? Dogwalker is a boyful of shocks.

"Did you get all you needed?" he asks me.

"I have P-words dancing upward," says I, "and I'll have a name for you tomorrow in my sleep."

"Hold onto it and don't tell me," says Dogwalker. "I don't want to hear a name until after we have his finger."

That magical day was only hours away, because the girl—whose name I never knew and whose face I never saw—was to cast her spell over Mr. Fed the very next day. As Dogwalker said, this was no job for lingeree. The girl did not dress pretty and pretended to be lacking in the social graces, but she was a good little clerical who was going through a most distressing period in her private life, because she had undergone a premature hysterectomy, poor lass, or so she told Mr. Fed, and here she was losing her womanhood and she had never really felt like a woman at all. But he was so kind to her, for weeks he had been so kind, and Dogwalker told me afterward how he locked the door of his office for just a few minutes, and held her and kissed her to make her feel womanly, and once his fingers had all made their little impressions on the thin electrified plastic microcoating all over her lovely naked back and breasts, she began to cry and most gratefully informed him that she did not want him to be unfaithful to his wife for her sake, that he had already given her such a much of a lovely gift by being so kind and understanding, and she felt better thinking that a man like him could bear to touch her knowing she was defemmed inside, and now she thought she had the confidence to go on. A very convincing act, and one calculated to get his hot naked handprints without giving him a crisis of conscience that might change his face and give him a whole new set of possible Ps.

The microsheet got all his fingers from several angles, and so Walker was able to dummy out a finger mask for our inside man within a single

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night. Right index. I looked at it most skeptically, I fear, because I had my doubts already dancing in the little lightpoints of my inmost mind. "Just one finger?"

"All we get is one shot," said Dogwalker. "One single try."

"But if he makes a mistake, if my first password isn't right, then he could use the middle finger on the second try."

"Tell me, my vertical pricket, whether you think Jesse H. Hunt is the sort of burr oak rat who makes mistakes?"

To which I had to answer that he was not, and yet I had my misgivings and my misgivings all had to do with needing a second finger, and yet I am vertical, not horizontal, which means that I can see the present as deep as you please but the future's not mine to see, que sera, sera.

From what Doggy told me, I tried to imagine Mr. Fed's reaction to this nubile flesh that he had pressed. If he had poked as well as peeked, I think it would have changed his P-word, but when she told him that she would not want to compromise his uncompromising virtue, it reinforced him as a most regular or even regulation fellow and his name remained pronouncedly the same, and his P-word also did not change. "Invictus-XYZrwr," quoth I to Dogwalker, for that was his veritable password, I knew it with more certainty than I had ever had before.

"Where in hell did you come up with that?" says he.

"If I knew how I did it, Walker, I'd never miss at all," says I. "I don't even know if it's in the goo or in the zoo. All the facts go down, and it all gets mixed around, and up come all these dancing P-words, little pieces of P."

"Yeah but you don't just make it up, what does it mean?"

"Invictus is an old poem in a frame stuck in his bureau drawer, which his mama gave him when he was still a little fed-to-be. XYZ is his idea of randomizing, and rwr is the first U.S. President that he admired. I don't know why he chose these words now. Six weeks ago he was using a different P-word with a lot of numbers in it, and six weeks from now he'll change again, but right now—"

"Sixty percent sure?" asked Doggy.

"I give no percents this time," says I. "I've never roamed through the bathroom of my subject before. But this or give me an assectomy, I've never been more sure."

Now that he had the P-word, the inside guy began to wear his magic finger every day, looking for a chance to be alone in Mr. Fed's office. He had already created the preliminary files, like any routine green card requests, and buried them within his work area. All he needed was to go in, sign on as Mr. Fed, and then if the system accepted his name and P-word and finger, he could call up the files, approve them, and be gone within a minute. But he had to have that minute.

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And on that wonderful magical day he had it. Mr. Fed had a meeting and his secretary sprung a leak a day early, and in went Inside Man with a perfectly legitimate note to leave for Hunt. He sat before the terminal, typed name and P-word and laid down his phony finger, and the machine spread wide its lovely legs and bid him enter. He had the files processed in forty seconds, laying down his finger for each green, then signed off and went on out. No sign, no sound that anything was wrong. As sweet as summertime, as smooth as ice, and all we had to do was sit and wait for green cards to come in the mail.

"Who you going to sell them to?" says I.

"I offer them to no one till I have clean greens in my hand," says he. Because Dogwalker is careful. What happened was not because he was not careful.

Every day we walked to the ten places where the envelopes were supposed to come. We knew they wouldn't be there for a week—the wheels of government grind exceeding slow, for good or ill. Every day we checked with Inside Man, whose name and face I have already given you; much good it will do, since both are no doubt different by now. He told us every time that all was the same, nothing was changed, and he was telling the truth, for the fed was most lugubrious and palatial and gave no leaks that anything was wrong. Even Mr. Hunt himself did not know that aught was amiss in his little kingdom.

Yet even with no sign that I could name, I was jumpy every morning and sleepless every night. "You walk like you got to use the toilet," says Walker to me, and it is verily so. Something is wrong, I say to myself, something is most deeply wrong, but I cannot find the name for it even though I know, and so I say nothing, or I lie to myself and try to invent a reason for my fear. "It's my big chance," says I. "To be twenty percent of rich."

"Rich," says he, "not just a fifth."

"Then you'll be double rich."

And he just grins at me, being the strong and silent type.

"But then why don't you sell nine," says I, "and keep the other green? Then you'll have the money to pay for it, and the green to go where you want in all the world."

But he just laughs at me and says, "Silly boy, my dear sweet pinheaded lightbrained little friend. If someone sees a pimp like me passing a green, he'll tell a fed, because he'll know there's been a mistake. Greens don't go to boys like me."

"But you won't be dressed like a pimp," says I, "and you won't stay in pimp hotels."

"I'm a low-class pimp," he says again, "and so however I dress that

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day, that's just the way pimps dress. And whatever hotel I go to, that's a low-class pimp hotel until I leave."

"Pimping isn't some disease," says I. "It isn't in your gonads and it isn't in your genes. If your daddy was a Kroc and your mama was an Iacocca, you wouldn't be a pimp."

"The hell I wouldn't," says he. "I'd just be a high-class pimp, like my mama and my daddy. Who do you think gets green cards? You can't sell no virgins on the street."

I thought that he was wrong and I still do. If anybody could go from low to high in a week, it's Dogwalker. He could be anything and do anything, and that's the truth. Or almost anything. If he could do *anything* then his story would have a different ending. But it was not his fault. Unless you blame pigs because they can't fly. I was the vertical one, wasn't I? I should have named my suspicions and we wouldn't have passed those greens.

I held them in my hands, there in his little room, all ten of them when he spilled them on the bed. To celebrate he jumped up so high he smacked his head on the ceiling again and again, which made them ceiling tiles dance and flip over and spill dust all over the room. "I flashed just one, a single one," says he, "and a cool million was what he said, and then I said what if ten? And he laughs and says fill in the check yourself."

"We should test them," says I.

"We can't test them," he says. "The only way to test it is to use it, and if you use it then your print and face are in its memory forever and so we could never sell it."

"Then sell one, and make sure it's clean."

"A package deal," he says. "If I sell one, and they think I got more but I'm holding out to raise the price, then I may not live to collect for the other nine, because I might have an accident and lose these little babies. I sell all ten tonight at once, and then I'm out of the green card business for life."

But more than ever that night I am afraid, he's out selling those greens to those sweet gentlebodies who are commonly referred to as Organic Crime, and there I am on his bed, shivering and dreaming because I know that something will go most deeply wrong but I still don't know what and I still don't know why. I keep telling myself, You're only afraid because nothing could ever go so right for you, you can't believe that anything could ever make you rich and safe. I say this stuff so much that I believe that I believe it, but I don't really, not down deep, and so I shiver again and finally I cry, because after all my body still believes I'm nine, and nine-year-olds have tear ducts very easy of access, no password required. Well he comes in late that night, and I'm asleep he thinks, and so he walks quiet instead of dancing, but I can hear the

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dancing in his little sounds, I know he has the money all safely in the bank, and so when he leans over to make sure if I'm asleep, I say, "Could I borrow a hundred thou?"

So he slaps me and he laughs and dances and sings, and I try to go along, you bet I do, I know I should be happy, but then at the end he says, "You just can't take it, can you? You just can't handle it," and then I cry all over again, and he just puts his arm around me like a movie dad and gives me play-punches on the head and says, "I'm gonna marry me a wife, I am, maybe even Mama Pimple herself, and we'll adopt you and have a little spielberg family in Summerfield, with a riding mower on a real grass lawn."

"I'm older than you *or* Mama Pimple," says I, but he just laughs. Laughs and hugs me until he thinks that I'm all right. Don't go home, he says to me that night, but home I got to go, because I know I'll cry again, from fear or something, anyway, and I don't want him to think his cure wasn't permanent. "No thanks," says I, but he just laughs at me. "Stay here and cry all you want to, Goo Boy, but don't go home tonight. I don't want to be alone tonight, and sure as hell you don't either." And so I slept between his sheets, like with a brother, him punching and tickling and pinching and telling dirty jokes about his whores, the most good and natural night I spent in all my life, with a true friend, which I know you don't believe, snickering and nickering and ickering your filthy little thoughts, there was no holes plugged that night because nobody was out to take pleasure from nobody else, just Dogwalker being happy and wanting me not to be so sad.

And after he was asleep, I wanted so bad to know who it was he sold them to, so I could call them up and say, "Don't use those greens, cause they aren't clean. I don't know how, I don't know why, but the feds are onto this, I know they are, and if you use those cards they'll nail your fingers to your face." But if I called would they believe me? They were careful too. Why else did it take a week? They had one of their nothing goons use a card to make sure it had no squeaks or leaks, and it came up clean. Only then did they give the cards to seven big boys, with two held in reserve. Even Organic Crime, the All-seeing Eye, passed those cards same as we did.

I think maybe Dogwalker was a little bit vertical too. I think he knew same as me that something was wrong with this. That's why he kept checking back with the inside man, cause he didn't trust how good it was. That's why he didn't spend any of his share. We'd sit there eating the same old schlock, out of his cut from some leg job or my piece from a data wipe, and every now and then he'd say, "Rich man's food sure tastes good." Or maybe even though he wasn't vertical he still thought maybe I was right when I thought something was wrong. Whatever he

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thought, though, it just kept getting worse and worse for me, until the morning when we went to see the inside man and the inside man was gone.

Gone clean. Gone like he never existed. His apartment for rent, cleaned out floor to ceiling. A phone call to the fed, and he was on vacation, which meant they had him, he wasn't just moved to another house with his newfound wealth. We stood there in his empty place, his shabby empty hovel that was ten times better than anywhere we ever lived, and Doggy says to me, real quiet, he says, "What was it? What did I do wrong? I thought I was like Hunt, I thought I never made a single mistake in this job, in this one job."

And that was it, right then I knew. Not a week before, not when it would do any good. Right then I finally knew it all, knew what Hunt had done. Jesse Hunt never made *mistakes*. But he was also so paranoid that he haired his bureau to see if the babysitter stole from him. So even though he would never *accidentally* enter the wrong P-word, he was just the kind who would do it *on purpose*. "He doublefingered every time," I says to Dog. "He's so damn careful he does his password wrong the first time every time, and then comes in on his second finger."

"So one time he comes in on the first try, so what?" He says this because he doesn't know computers like I do, being half-glass myself.

"The system knew the pattern, that's what. Jesse H. is so precise he never changed a bit, so when *we* came in on the first try, that set off alarms. It's my fault, Dog, I knew how crazy paranoidical he is, I knew that something was wrong, but not till this minute I didn't know what it was. I should have known it when I got his password, I should have known, I'm sorry, you never should have gotten me into this, I'm sorry, you should have listened to me when I told you something was wrong, I should have known, I'm sorry."

What I done to Doggy that I never meant to do. What I done to him! Anytime, I could have thought of it, it was all there inside my glassy little head, but no, I didn't think of it till after it was way too late. And maybe it's because I didn't want to think of it, maybe it's because I really wanted to be wrong about the green cards, but however it flew, I did what I do, which is to say I'm not the pontiff in his fancy chair, by which I mean I can't be smarter than myself.

Right away he called the gentlebens of Ossified Crime to warn them, but I was already plugged into the library sucking news as fast as I could and so I knew it wouldn't do no good, cause they got all seven of the big boys and their nitwit taster, too, locked up good and tight for card fraud.

And what they said on the phone to Dogwalker made things real clear. "We're dead," says Doggy.

"Give them time to cool," says I.

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"They'll never cool," says he. "There's no chance, they'll never forgive this even if they know the whole truth, because look at the names they gave the cards to, it's like they got them for their biggest boys on the borderline, the habibs who bribe presidents of little countries and rake off cash from octopods like Shell and ITT and every now and then kill somebody and walk away clean. Now they're sitting there in jail with the whole life story of the organization in their brains, so they don't care if we meant to do it or not. They're hurting, and the only way they know to make the hurt go away is to pass it on to somebody else. And that's us. They want to make us hurt, and hurt real bad, and for a long long time."

I never saw Dog so scared. That's the only reason we went to the feds ourselves. We didn't ever want to stool, but we needed their protection plan, it was our only hope. So we offered to testify how we did it, not even for immunity, just so they'd change our faces and put us in a safe jail somewhere to work off the sentence and come out alive, you know? That's all we wanted.

But the feds, they laughed at us. They had the inside guy, see, and he was going to get immunity for testifying. "We don't need you," they says to us, "and we don't care if you go to jail or not. It was the big guys we wanted."

"If you let us walk," says Doggy, "then they'll think we set them up."

"Make us laugh," says the feds. "Us work with street poots like you? They know that we don't stoop so low."

"They bought from us," says Doggy. "If we're big enough for them, we're big enough for the dongs."

"Do you believe this?" says one fed to his identical junior officer. "These jollies are begging us to take them into jail. Well listen tight, my jolly boys, maybe we don't want to add you to the taxpayers' expense account, did you think of that? Besides, all we'd give you is time, but on the street, those boys will give you time and a half, and it won't cost us a dime."

So what could we do? Doggy just looks like somebody sucked out six pints, he's so white. On the way out of the fedhouse, he says, "Now we're going to find out what it's like to die."

And I says to him, "Walker, they stuck no gun in your mouth yet, they shove no shiv in your eye. We still breathing, we got legs, so let's *walk* out of here."

"Walk!" he says. "You walk out of G-boro, glasshead, and you bump into trees."

"So what?" says I. "I can plug in and pull out all the data we want about how to live in the woods. Lots of empty land out there. Where do you think the marijuana grows?"

"I'm a city boy," he says. "I'm a city boy." Now we're standing out in

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front, and he's looking around. "In the city I got a chance, I know the city."

"Maybe in New York or Dallas," says I, "but G-boro's just too small, not even half a million people, you can't lose yourself deep enough here."

"Yeah well," he says, still looking around. "It's none of your business now anyway, Goo Boy. They aren't blaming *you*, they're blaming *me*."

"But it's my fault," says I, "and I'm staying with you to tell them so."

"You think they're going to stop and listen?" says he.

"I'll let them shoot me up with speakeasy so they know I'm telling the truth."

"It's nobody's fault," says he. "And I don't give a twelve-inch poker whose fault it is anyway. You're clean, but if you stay with me you'll get all muddy, too. I don't need you around, and you sure as hell don't need me. Job's over. Done. Get lost."

But I couldn't do that. The same way he couldn't go on walking dogs, I couldn't just run off and leave him to eat my mistake. "They know I was your P-word man," says I. "They'll be after me, too."

"Maybe for a while, Goo Boy. But you transfer your twenty percent into Bobby Joe's Face Shop, so they aren't looking for you to get a refund, and then stay quiet for a week and they'll forget all about you."

He's right but I don't care. "I was in for twenty percent of rich," says I. "So I'm in for fifty percent of trouble."

All of a sudden he sees what he's looking for. "There they are, Goo Boy, the dorks they sent to hit me. In that Mercedes." I look but all I see are electrics. Then his hand is on my back and he gives me a shove that takes me right off the portico and into the bushes, and by the time I crawl out, Doggy's nowhere in sight. For about a minute I'm pissed about getting scratched up in the plants, until I realize he was getting me out of the way, so I wouldn't get shot down or hacked up or lased out, whatever it is they planned to do to him to get even.

I was safe enough, right? I should've walked away, I should've ducked right out of the city. I didn't even have to refund the money. I had enough to go clear out of the country and live the rest of my life where even Occipital Crime couldn't find me.

And I thought about it. I stayed the night in Mama Pimple's flophouse because I knew somebody would be watching my own place. All that night I thought about places I could go. Australia. New Zealand. Or even a foreign place, I could afford a good vocabulary crystal so picking up a new language would be easy.

But in the morning I couldn't do it. Mama Pimple didn't exactly ask me but she looked so worried and all I could say was, "He pushed me into the bushes and I don't know where he is."

And she just nods at me and goes back to fixing breakfast. Her hands

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are shaking she's so upset. Because she knows that Dogwalker doesn't stand a chance against Orphan Crime.

"I'm sorry," says I.

"What can you do?" she says. "When they want you, they get you. If the feds don't give you a new face, you can't hide."

"What if they didn't want him?" says I.

She laughs at me. "The story's all over the street. The arrests were in the news, and now everybody knows the big boys are looking for Walker. They want him so bad the whole street can smell it."

"What if they knew it wasn't his fault?" says I. "What if they knew it was an accident? A mistake?"

Then Mama Pimple squints at me—not many people can tell when she's squinting, but I can—and she says, "Only one boy can tell them that so they'll believe it."

"Sure, I know," says I.

"And if that boy walks in and says, Let me tell you why you don't want to hurt my friend Dogwalker—"

"Nobody said life was safe," I says. "Besides, what could they do to me that's worse than what already happened to me when I was nine?"

She comes over and just puts her hand on my head, just lets her hand lie there for a few minutes, and I know what I've got to do.

So I did it. Went to Fat Jack's and told him I wanted to talk to Junior Mint about Dogwalker, and it wasn't thirty seconds before I was hustled on out into the alley, and driven somewhere with my face mashed into the floor of the car so I couldn't tell where it was. Idiots didn't know that somebody as vertical as me can tell the number of wheel revolutions and the exact trajectory of every curve. I could've drawn a freehand map of where they took me. But if I let them know that, I'd never come home, and since there was a good chance I'd end up dosed with speakeasy, I went ahead and erased the memory. Good thing I did—that was the first thing they asked me as soon as they had the drug in me.

Gave me a grown-up dose, they did, so I practically told them my whole life story and my opinion of them and everybody and everything else, so the whole session took hours, felt like forever, but at the end they knew, they absolutely knew that Dogwalker was straight with them, and when it was over and I was coming up so I had some control over what I said, I asked them, I begged them, Let Dogwalker live. Just let him go. He'll give back the money, and I'll give back mine, just let him go.

"Okay," says the guy.

I didn't believe it.

"No, you can believe me, we'll let him go."

"You got him?"

"Picked him up before you even came in. It wasn't hard."

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"And you didn't kill him?"

"Kill him? We had to get the money back first, didn't we, so we needed him alive till morning, and then you came in, and your little story changed our minds, it really did, you made us feel all sloppy and sorry for that poor old pimp."

Few a few seconds there I actually believed that it was going to be all right. But then I knew from the way they looked, from the way they acted, I knew the same way I know about passwords.

They brought in Dogwalker and handed me a book. Dogwalker was very quiet and stiff and he didn't look like he recognized me at all. I didn't even have to look at the book to know what it was. They scooped out his brain and replaced it with glass, like me only way over the line, way way over, there was nothing of Dogwalker left inside his head, just glass pipe and goo. The book was a User's Manual, with all the instructions about how to program him and control him.

I looked at him and he was Dogwalker, the same face, the same hair, everything. Then he moved or talked and he was dead, he was somebody else living in Dogwalker's body. And I says to them, "Why? Why didn't you just kill him, if you were going to do this?"

"This one was too big," says the guy. "Everybody in G-boro knew what happened, everybody in the whole country, everybody in the world. Even if it was a mistake, we couldn't let it go. No hard feelings, Goo Boy. He *is* alive. And so are you. And you both stay that way, as long as you follow a few simple rules. Since he's over the line, he has to have an owner, and you're it. You can use him however you want—rent out data storage, pimp him as a jig or a jaw—but he stays with you always. Every day, he's on the street here in G-boro, so we can bring people here and show them what happens to boys who make mistakes. You can even keep your cut from the job, so you don't have to scramble at all if you don't want to. That's how much we like you, Goo Boy. But if he leaves this town or doesn't come out, even one single solitary day, you'll be very sorry for the last six hours of your life. Do you understand?"

I understood. I took him with me. I bought this place, these clothes, and that's how it's been ever since. That's why we go out on the street every day. I read the whole manual, and I figure there's maybe ten percent of Dogwalker left inside. The part that's Dogwalker can't ever get to the surface, can't ever talk or move or anything like that, can't ever remember or even consciously think. But maybe he can still wander around inside what used to be his head, maybe he can sample the data stored in all that goo. Maybe someday he'll even run across this story and he'll know what happened to him, and he'll know that I tried to save him.

In the meantime this is my last will and testament. See, I have us

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doing all kinds of research on Orgasmic Crime, so that someday I'll know enough to reach inside the system and unplug it. Unplug it all, and make those bastards lose everything, the way they took everything away from Dogwalker. Trouble is, some places there ain't no way to look without leaving tracks. Goo is as goo do, I always say. I'll find out I'm not as good as I think I am when somebody comes along and puts a hot steel putz in my face. Knock my brains out when it comes. But there's this, lying in a few hundred places in the system. Three days after I don't lay down my code in a certain program in a certain place, this story pops into view. The fact you're reading this means I'm dead.

Or it means I paid them back, and so I quit suppressing this cause I don't care anymore. So maybe this is my swan song, and maybe this is my victory song. You'll never know, will you, mate?

But you'll wonder. I like that. You wondering about us, whoever you are, you thinking about old Goo Boy and Dogwalker, you guessing whether the fangs who scooped Doggy's skull and turned him into self-propelled property paid for it down to the very last delicious little drop.

And in the meantime, I've got this goo machine to take care of. Only ten percent a man, he is, but then I'm only forty percent myself. All added up together we make only half a man. But that's the half that counts. That's the half that still wants things. The goo in me and the goo in him is all just light pipes and electricity. Data without desire. Lightspeed trash. But I have some desires left, just a few, and maybe so does Dogwalker, even fewer. And we'll get what we want. We'll get it all. Every speck. Every sparkle. Believe it. ●

BALANCED SCALES

Startled by an armadillo last night.
He was outside my tent flap,
all scales and nervous eyes.
He looked into my world,
I looked out to his.
I stayed where I was.
He moved on.

—Jack C. Haldeman II

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THE FRONT PAGE

by Ronald Anthony Cross

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The door was unlocked, open a crack, but I could see the chains, many chains. And her little glittering eyes. Too bright.

"How can I be sure you're not one of *them?*"

I had no idea who "them" was. "I told you I was one of *us,* and I showed you this I.D." I flashed my *National Revealer* press I.D. card again. "It's the real thing," I said. I ought to know, I had worked hard enough to earn it.

"They have many secret superhuman powers," she said. "They could use them easily enough to get a press card." But she sounded a little unsure.

"No they couldn't," I insisted. "No one, but *no* one, could get one of these except a genuine reporter for the *Rev,* as we reporters call it."

"Well . . . " she said coquettishly, and one chain came off.

"But wait a minute," she said. "I know. Who's Liz's secret heartthrob? You should know *that* if you work for the *Revealer.*"

My mind spun dizzily. Who was Liz, anyway? I had a vague picture of some overweight, aging movie star who was never very attractive to start with. The publication I worked for had at least one article about her in each issue. Her amazing love life. The food she ate. The shoes she wore. Etc. For some reason I could never get a handle on, she seemed to be just about the most interesting human being in the world to everyone but me.

"I love her," Bernie (that's my boss) had confessed. "I've always loved her. Ever since she was an innocent little seventeen-year-old who loved horses." (Who loved *horses?!?)*

My one respite from the agony of being subjected to a plethora of horrendously trivial assignments was that I had never been assigned to do surveillance on the stars.

"I don't know," I pleaded, "listen, I just write it. I don't read it—okay? Get out your last issue. Page three. 'Lightning Strikes Statue' is the title, by Eddie Zuckos. That's me, see?" I showed her the card again.

"Oh yes, I remember that one. The statue came to life momentarily and walked a few steps across the lawn. You had photos of the footprints."

I nodded yes. A chain came off. I nodded again. Another chain came off. Now I had the key—I just kept nodding and saying "yes" until all the chains were off and I was in the house.

"By the way, who *are* 'they'?" I said.

"Oh, you know!" she said coyly.

Okay. I won't describe the inside of her house. Why should I? It was so full of furniture and lamps and grotesque statues, and little glass figures of every creature under the sun, and paintings of cats made out of copper or tinfoil or whatever, and Jesus Christ over and over: so many paintings and statues of Christ that it was a veritable army, except that

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it was an army of skinny naked guys being whipped, tortured, and crucified. I won't describe the inside of her house because it was too complex for my consciousness to register. I'd have to live there for a couple of weeks, and each day maybe inventory another corner until I had it all down on paper.

"All right," I said, in my let's-get-down-to-business tone. I was so sick of these Mickey Mouse assignments. When would I ever get on to something *big?*

"Name. Date of birth." I went through the list of personal data.

"Now what exactly was it you wanted to report?"

She turned her head and lowered her eyelids and looked at me slyly, from an odd sideways angle, like a bird.

"*You* know," she said.

"I have to ask these questions," I said, "it's important that I get your exact answers. In your own words. You see? At the *Revealer* we make every possible effort to get the truth, see?"

Really, I knew what it was. I was just hoping we'd got it wrong.

"Well, Eddie," she said, "I vomit rocks."

"You vomit rocks," I repeated, trying to keep the disgust out of my voice.

"Not just any rocks. Some of them are in the shape of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Some of them look a little like Liz. In profile. That's what Harriet sez. Harriet's my next-door neighbor and she's a big, big fan. Of Liz, not of me, of course. 'Why, that looks just *like* her,' she sez. And I sez, 'Who, Harriet?' and Harriet sez, 'My *God,* Edna, can't you *see* it, it's just as plain as the nose on your face. It looks just like the queen.' Harriet always calls her 'the queen,' you see. I always said, 'Harriet, she's not the queen. That's a different Elizabeth,' but Harriet always sez, 'She's the queen to me, Edna. Liz'll always be the queen to me.' "

Chattering all the while, Edna led me through the jungle of grotesque bric-a-brac into her bedroom. I was totally lost before we were halfway there.

"Doesn't look like Jesus to *me,"* I said, holding the oddly shaped little stone in the palm of my hand. Starting to get interested. "Looks like that guy in the Bruce Lee movie. What's his name? Big mean guy with a beard."

"Does *not* look mean," she said, snatching it out of my hands. "He *is* a movie star, though," she said, getting interested herself.

"Sure," I said. "I can't think of his name." (Who could?) "Great big guy with a beard." A vague picture of a tall, bearded guy with Bruce Lee's foot stuck in his face flitted through my mind's eye.

"Let me get a couple of shots." I started to check out the camera, which was in its case, slung around my neck.

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"I thought you were supposed to have someone following you around with a camera, taking all the photos for you."

Sure, that'll be the day.

"He's sick," I said. "And since I'm pretty good at it myself . . ."

"Jack of many trades," she was saying scornfully, when my beeper went off, saving me from the "master of none" part.

"Emergency. Can I use your phone?"

She led me back into the living room, where, sure enough, there was a phone hidden amidst all the bric-a-brac.

"Vomiting *stones?*" Bernie shouted in a shocked voice. "Oh yeah, I forgot. Forget about that. Get the hell over to Fletcher Valley. Can you get there by sundown? Get there, okay? This is important, Eddie. Handle with care, do you dig? Don't fuck it up, or it's your last big assignment as well as your first. Dig? Jesus Christ, vomiting stones, *what* vomiting stones?"

"You're the one gave me the lead," I shouted back into the empty phone. Bernie had already hung up. What was the address he'd given me? 537 Grove Avenue or Grove Street, Fletcher Valley? That had better be it.

A disappointed Mrs. Edna Fosbert let me out of the house every bit as reluctantly as she had let me in.

"Are you sure you can't tell me what it's all about?"

"Secret," I said. "My lips are sealed. But you can read all about it in the next *Rev.* Besides," I said, hoping I was lying, "cheer up, I'll be back to finish up your story."

It was just turning dark when I pulled past the narrow drive leading off the road from the mailbox marked Ms. T.T. Jones 537 Grove Avenue. I breathed a sigh of relief. So far, so good. As Bernie had taken pains to point out to me, this was my first big one. And only because I was the only *Rev* reporter close enough to get here on time. I had better not . . . , etc.

So I drove past and pulled up and parked off the side of the road and hurried up the rustic driveway on foot, sly reporter-style.

The door flew open before I could knock on it.

"Hurry!" she said. "He'll be here soon."

I stood there momentarily stunned, mouth open. It was just too weird to see her here in this rustic environment, standing in the doorway dressed in red silk panties and brassiere, sort of bulging out of everything.

"Well for gawdssake will you hurry up and git *in* here? You spose to be used to this kind of stuff by now, ain't you? Like a doctor or somethin'?"

"Yeah, right," I mumbled, following her as she led me quickly through the front room and straight into her bedroom.

"You can hide in the closet there, and just leave the door open a little,

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see? He'll be here just any *minute* now. See here, that's his mark." She tilted her head back and showed me two little puckered sores on her neck.

She shivered dramatically and squealed—"Ow, I jess love it!" And smiled. "Quick, get *in* there."

Inside the closet, I set up my camera. Checked it out twice. I would have to use the flash. Great, right? I wished to hell they'd give me one of those cameras with the super film you can use with hardly any light at all, but fat chance.

I was checking out my camera for the third time when I heard a loud fizzy sound like steak sizzling on a barbecue, and I peeked out just in time to see smoke pouring in through the open bedroom window.

"Thet you, Count? Don't you jest come in here thet way without askin' or nothin'. I'm half nakid."

Gradually the smoke took on the shape of a skinny little dark-haired guy, his hair plastered back and greased down flat as a pancake, wearing a tux.

"I like you zat way, princess."

"I don't know why you must insist on callin' me a princess when I must hev told you a million times thet I am only a simple farmer lady. Tina T. Jones, thet's me, is all."

The little guy just practically swooped on her. But she pushed him away from her, playfully.

"You will always be zee princess to me," he said in his phony accent.

Now I could get a pretty good look at him in the moonlight flooding in the open window, and I was amazed at how ugly he was. His nose was too big, his lips were flabby and sort of protruding like he was always on the verge of sucking something, and his eyes were tiny. He was one of those tiny teeny little guys who always look like they're going to break into tears any minute. But he sure wasn't shy. He snatched excitedly at her red brassiere, but she coyly slapped his hand away.

"Honestly," she said, "I don't see what it is you *see* in me. I'm jest a simple farmer lady. Not like some glamor queen you see in the *National Revealer* or nuthin'." She leered knowingly in my direction.

Shit! I figured it better be now or never. So what the hell, I just kicked open the door, and popped the flash. The room lit up.

The little guy actually *hissed,* and held his arm up in front of his eyes in a dramatic pose.

Then the light faded.

"Jesus Christ!" he said in plain English. "Did you just take my picture, with a flash bulb? What the fuck are you, the village idiot?"

Suddenly it dawned on me. Shit, what was I doing? I dropped the camera like a rock, it bounced on my chest, luckily I still had it in the

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case, and I held my hands up in front of me, forming a cross with my index fingers. "Whooo," I said, inadvertently trying to add a music score. "Whooo, it's the *sign of the cross.*"

The count stopped advancing; for a moment he looked puzzled. Then he said, "You're *kidding.*"

Suddenly he slapped me in the arm hard enough to spin me around, bounce me off the wall and down on the floor.

"Sanctimonious religious prig!" he shouted in a mean tone of voice. "What the hell do I care about your WASP sensibilities?"

"Ow, damn it, you really hit hard for such a little guy," I groaned.

"Hit hard? Hit *hard?* I'm a *vampire,* you dunce. Get up and I'll show you hit hard!"

All this time Tina was pulling at his elbow. "Don't hurt him, honey. Don't break his camera, okay? I'll *never* git on the cover."

"Get out of my way, you dumb bimbo." He shoved her aside.

"Dumb *bimbo?* You said you loved me. You told me I was your princess. Now I'm just a dumb bimbo. Oh, God. You men! You all are just brute animals. You don't care . . . you don't . . . " She threw herself down on the bed and started weeping hysterically.

The count grabbed hold of my wrist and snapped me up onto my feet like I was a whip and he was cracking it. He grabbed hold of my throat with his other hand, then turned back toward the bed.

"Stop it, will you? Stop that crying. Listen, you *are* still my princess, of course. I just . . . lost control, is all. This was . . . I mean, Zis was a crazy idea, princess. In zee first place, everyone knows you can't take a photo of a vampire."

"I didn't know that," I choked, genuinely surprised.

"Shut up, idiot," the count said, clamping down a little extra on the throat.

"Ztop crying, my zweet. Et weel all be . . ."

"I thought you really loved me," Tina bawled.

"I do. I do!"

"Listen," I choked, barely able to get it out. "If you kill me she's going to be issed-pay."

"Then it's going to be ater-lay for oo-yay. Where she can't ee-say," he hissed, dragging me toward the front door.

"Is thet pig Latin? Are you men talkin' pig Latin around me? Damn you," Tina shouted, sitting up on the bed. "Don't you *dare.*"

"Listen, my princess, we are not speaking the . . . how you zay . . . Latin pig talk. But we have to go outside for a moment or two, and . . . well, we have some important things to zettle."

"You men!" Tina said disgustedly. "Well, hurry right back here, Count, because we've got some important things to settle, too, right here between

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us. And there won't be no more don't-you-know-*what* till they're settled, neither."

I tried to cry out, but he had found just the right amount of pressure to shut me down, and was just dragging me out of the door when my beeper went off again.

"Vot is dat?" he said.

I pointed at my open mouth, and gasped like a fish out of water.

"For gawdssake, will you let go of his throat so the man can answer you?" Tina said.

"All right. All right." He let go.

"Emergency beeper," I said. "Quick, where's your phone?"

I slammed down the receiver. *I can't believe it,* I thought. *Twice in the same day. Me. Eddie Zuckos.*

Tina and the count were staring at me expectantly.

"Flying saucers are invading earth," I said. "They've just set down in a farmer's cornfield a few miles from here. Wilmer Everett?"

"Why, I know him," Tina said, "jest straight up Grove Avenue, take a left on Grove Place, but don't y'all get confused and head on out Grove Lane, ya hear? Anyhow, ya jest go right out Grove Place about half a mile, till ya come to thet great big oak tree, only ya won't be able ta see it, it bein' the pitch black dark middle of the night 'n all. But if ya *could* see it, ya jest . . ."

"Oh for Godssake, will you shut up!" the count shouted.

Tina began to weep and mumble about men again, as if that little jerk had anything to do with *men.*

"Sorry," I said in my sincerest tone of voice, "but this is a real Class A emergency here. We can only thank God that farmer had a copy of the *National Revealer* with the emergency number on the cover. He got through to us, and we've got to get through to him."

I put out my hand to the count. "I guess we'll just have to put aside our differences for now, so that I can continue the *Revealer's* policy of bringing the truth to the people.—The sometimes very weird truth," I added.

Tina now had new tears in her eyes. "Thet's *beautiful,*" she said.

The next thing I knew, I was in the old Ford, racing up Grove this and down Grove that, with Tina shooting out a steady stream of complex, almost baroque, directions.

"Ya see that old shack over to the right? Course not. How *could* you see it, it bein' dark as sin 'n all? But if ya *could,* you wouldn't have wanted to turn *there,* that bein' about three blocks too soon—hey, slow down, y'all just missed the turn you wanted while I was busy explainin'!" We backed up.

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"Wish I hed time ta change inta somethin' nice and do somethin' with this hair." She looked coyly at the count, who ignored her.

"Cue," I said. "Cue."

"Ze hair looks great," the count grumbled. "This had better be for real, Eddie."

I slammed on the brakes, and the car skidded to a halt, swerving sideways. I locked my glance into his. "Are you questioning the honesty of the *National Revealer?*" I said between gritted teeth.

"Will you men stop squabbling like little boys and get on with it? Of course nobody's questioning the *Revealer,* it bein' the only paper in town prints the whole total weird truth without any regard for its reputation. You can't *get* more honest then thet, can you? Now will you for gawdssake stop squabbling and drive?"

I drove. I had given up trying to ditch the count and Tina, who was now wearing some kind of huge pink puffs for slippers and a fluorescent pink bathrobe, and who looked as if she belonged in a flying saucer anyway.

"What flying saucer?" the old man said, in a slow, mechanical-sounding voice. "You must have created a mistake. Beings from another planet many universes away here have arrived only never.—Not even," he added, just to be sure.

"Well, sorry to have bothered you, old timer. Must have been a crank call. Hard to imagine someone would do that to the *National Rev,* but sorry to have . . ."

"Ix-nay with the ong-wray umber-nay," the count said. "You idiot, can't you tell he's been ossessed-pay?"

"Ossessed-pay?" I mumbled. That was a hard one.

"Being," the farmer said, "ossessed-pay is no part of this vocabulary. Elucidate, please?"

"Possessed!" the count shouted. "Ucking-fay *ossessed*-pay, get it? Pos*sessed*!" He was positively shrieking with rage.

"Possessed," the old man said. "No, not! Neither controlled nor dominated am I. Not even now by beings from outer space who are not now here.—Even!" he added.

The count shoved the old man aside and rushed into the house. "Where are they? What's going on here?"

"Be careful, honey," Tina said. "He's an old man."

"Be careful, sure," the count grumbled, wandering into the kitchen. "Be especially careful with the body of a host. Sure, that's one of the vampire ten commandments, right?"

The old farmer followed us into the living room: "Do *not,* if I may advise, search out back in the cornfield for little men kneeling down

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controlling this flesh form with a remote control device. Find them there you will not," the old man suggested helpfully.

And sure enough, that's where we found them. Ugly little green buggers, giggling, one of them apparently controlling the poor old farmer from a device that looked suspiciously like a super-advanced TV remote control. A Sony, probably. The rest of them appeared to be busy constructing a larger machine, unlike anything I'd ever seen before. When they saw us they suddenly shouted "Oh oh! oh oh!" over and over again. Sounded sort of like a chorus of frogs.

"My Gawd, they're ugly," Tina whispered in awe. She ought to know, having a love affair with the count and all.

Pop. Pop. Pop. I lit up the scene with my flash. I had them. I had them now.

They dropped the control, and jumped up, hands over eyes, and stumbled about mumbling, "Hurt. Hurt. Bad light! Too much. Bad bad bad. Now no more good behavior here. No more fun guys! Control everybody on Earth all the time. Hurt you bad and much of it."

The old farmer stumbled and then shook his head. "What the . . ." he said. "Whew, thought I was a *Martian* or somethin' there fer a minute."

Then he looked out into the field at the little men and their machine, and past them at the saucer.

"What the . . . ? You little basterds wrecked half a my cornfield, did you? Think it's just about time to kick me some butt round here."

He started rolling up his sleeves.

Now all the little green men were holding up their little green fists and backing off in a group. Muttering "Fight fight fight, kill kill kill."

"Why, my Gawd," Tina whispered, "they're all stark stitch *nakid.*"

The count furled his cape and hissed dramatically. Then he rushed into the field, shouting, "These humans are *my* cattle, and no little green noseballs are taking them away from me!"

The little green men broke and ran for the saucer, all the time yelling "Oh oh! oh oh!" They barely made it, and they slammed the hatch just in front of the count's rather large nose—if "slammed" can be used to describe a process whereby a lot of oddly shaped pieces of some kind of weird shiny silver metal fit themselves together like a crossword puzzle.

And soon we were standing there watching a small glowing light shoot across the sky and blink out.

"Romantic, ain't it?" Tina sighed.

Still hissing and fuming in maniacal rage, the count was prancing about tearing the hell out of their strange machine. Finally, having trampled it to bits, breathing hard, but still looking pissed, he turned back to me. "And now, my friend, you and I have some usiness-bay to tend-ay to."

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"Oh, I don't think so, Count," I said. "I think we'll both have to postpone it for some other time."

"And what makes you think *that,* my little human?"

Little—*me?* I was damn near as big as him.

"Well," I said, "see that light around the edges of those mountains over there? Guess what *that* means? I've got a busy day ahead of me; and as for you, well, you do know what they say about vampires and the sun, don't you?"

"Shit," he hissed, and threw his cloak over his head. "I just *hate* the sun!"

Tina put her arm around his shoulder and gave me a look of tender disgust. "Ah never will figure out why he makes such a big fuss over a little sunlight."

"Oh yeah," he mumbled from under his cloak, "try a little skin cancer sometime, princess, see how you like that."

"Oh, thet's not really true," Tina said, leading him back toward the house, "thet's just one of those scare stories the mainstream press is always printin' to up their newspaper sales. Can't trust none of 'em. 'Cept the *Revealer,* thet is." She turned and smiled at me.

I looked at my watch. Yawned. No rest for the wicked. "Come on," I said, "give you a ride. Gotta get this story off prontissimo."

"Just hold yer horses there a minute, sonny," the old man cut in, "How 'bout givin' me a hint 'bout just what am I supposed to do with all *thet.*" He pointed to the broken parts of the alien machinery.

"Well, you probably should call the Army," I said.

"And what will they do with it?"

"Probably label it 'top secret,' then hide it away somewhere where no one can find it, and then forget about it."

"Figures," he said, and turned wearily back toward his house. But then he grunted and turned back around, cupped his hand over his beard-covered mouth, and whispered in my ear, "What *is* he, anyway, sonny, a pansy or somethin'? Never did see a man so upset over a little sunlight."

All the way back, the count huddled under his cloak, mumbling to himself.

"You all stop back agin sometime," Tina said, when I dropped them off. "Sometime when we're better company, a little later on in the evening. He's probly jest gonna spend the whole rest of the day mumblin' to hisself in the closet."

A few days later I picked up a copy of this week's *Rev,* shaking with anticipation, and just froze in disbelief at what I saw on the cover.

I charged to the nearest phonebooth and fairly threw the poor guy who was using it out into the street.

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"Will you calm down, Eddie," Bernie said. "It's right there on page three. 'Vampire Saves Earth From Flying Saucer Men.' Photo of nobody chasing a bunch of little green guys through a cornfield. I repeat: 'photo of *no*body.' "

I slammed down the receiver. Broke it, I hope. I stared again at the cover of the *National Revealer,* and then threw it down. Picked it up again and called back. Hadn't quite broken the phone, it just hissed a little in my ear.

"You calmed down a little now?" Bernie said.

"Jesus Christ!" I said, "Jesus *Christ,* Bernie: 'Liz Takes Monkey Lover'? *That's* the lead story? 'Liz Takes Monkey Lover'?"

"Hey," he said. "We're an honest rag here at the *Rev.* We give people what they really want. Not what the government wants them to hear, like those other rags. 'Vampire saves earth' is great news, it's just too bad both stories broke at the same time. Liz comes first. Pretty much no matter *what* happens, Liz comes first." He paused.

"Besides," he chuckled, "that monkey's a pretty cute little guy."

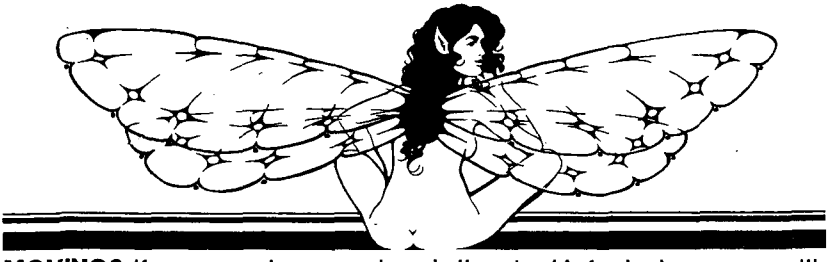
I just stood there staring at the receiver. Maybe I *had* broken it.

"Don't you find that monkey lover stuff kind of . . . well . . . revolting, Bernie?"

"Frankly, I find it sort of refreshingly piquant," he said in a sincere tone of voice.

This time I put the receiver down gently. I'd probably want to use it again sometime, I realized.

Outside the booth it was a bright shiny day. Beautiful weather. *Wonder what Liz does on days like this,* I thought to myself. I'm kind of getting interested, I realized, with a start. Maybe I'm front page potential after all. ●



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(Continued from page 17)

Valhalla. He must have the gold, at any cost, and he gets it.

This is the prologue, the relatively brief (two hours) first music drama, *Das Rheingold.* The next three nights, from *Die Walkure* to *Gotterdammerung,* show Wotan coming into conflict with his headstrong daughter, Brunnehilde, leader of the Valkyries. He must let his illegitimate son die, destroying the magic sword, and then hope that, with Valhalla shrouded by death and the curse of the treasure, a hero will appear to set things right. This hero, Siegfried, must forge a new sword—Nothung—and then learn fear. The last evening —*The Twilight of the Gods*—brings destruction to the gods of Valhalla and restoration of the gold to the rhinemaidens.

There. That has got to be the briefest synopsis of the Ring saga *ever.* And what happened in 1976 was revolutionary. Instead of a realistic staging, with mountains and caves and all the rigmarole of traditional fantasy, Chereau staged the opera as a nineteenth century drawing room piece, with references to the coming of the industrial age and to Wagner himself and his travails. The Rhine was host to a turbo-electric generator. Wotan spends the first evening dressed in a smoking jacket.

It was thrilling theater—even if the German audience went wild booing the production and its perpetrators. It went on to win respect (a one-and-a-half hour ovation when the production was retired in 1980) as a valid re-interpretation of the legendary material, giving it political overtones.

You can experience this incredible event on Phillips CD Video issue of the complete Ring. There are four sets, one for each of the music dramas, all in digital stereo with his quality image of the laserdisc. There is also a special disc, *The Making of the Ring,* which goes behind the scenes of this production. For those who have never experienced much, if any, of the Ring, TelArc CD and Records has released a *Ring Without Words*—no Wagnerian singing, just a one-hour condensation of the musical highlights. Surprisingly seamless, the musical material goes from the low E flat of *Das Rheingold*'s opening to the ecstatic music of the end of *Gotterdammerung,* when Brunnhilde rides her horse, Grane, onto Siegfried's funeral pyre.

Deutsche Grammaphon has started releasing the Metropolitan Opera's new recordings of *The Ring,* conducted by James Levine, and PBS will stage a televised festival broadcast of all four evenings in the summer of 1990. And even more intriguing, DC Comics announced that Roy Thomas will be scripting a comic book/graphic novel adaptation of *The Ring of the Nibelungen* for projected release next year.

As for me, I've already started working on the novels . . . ●

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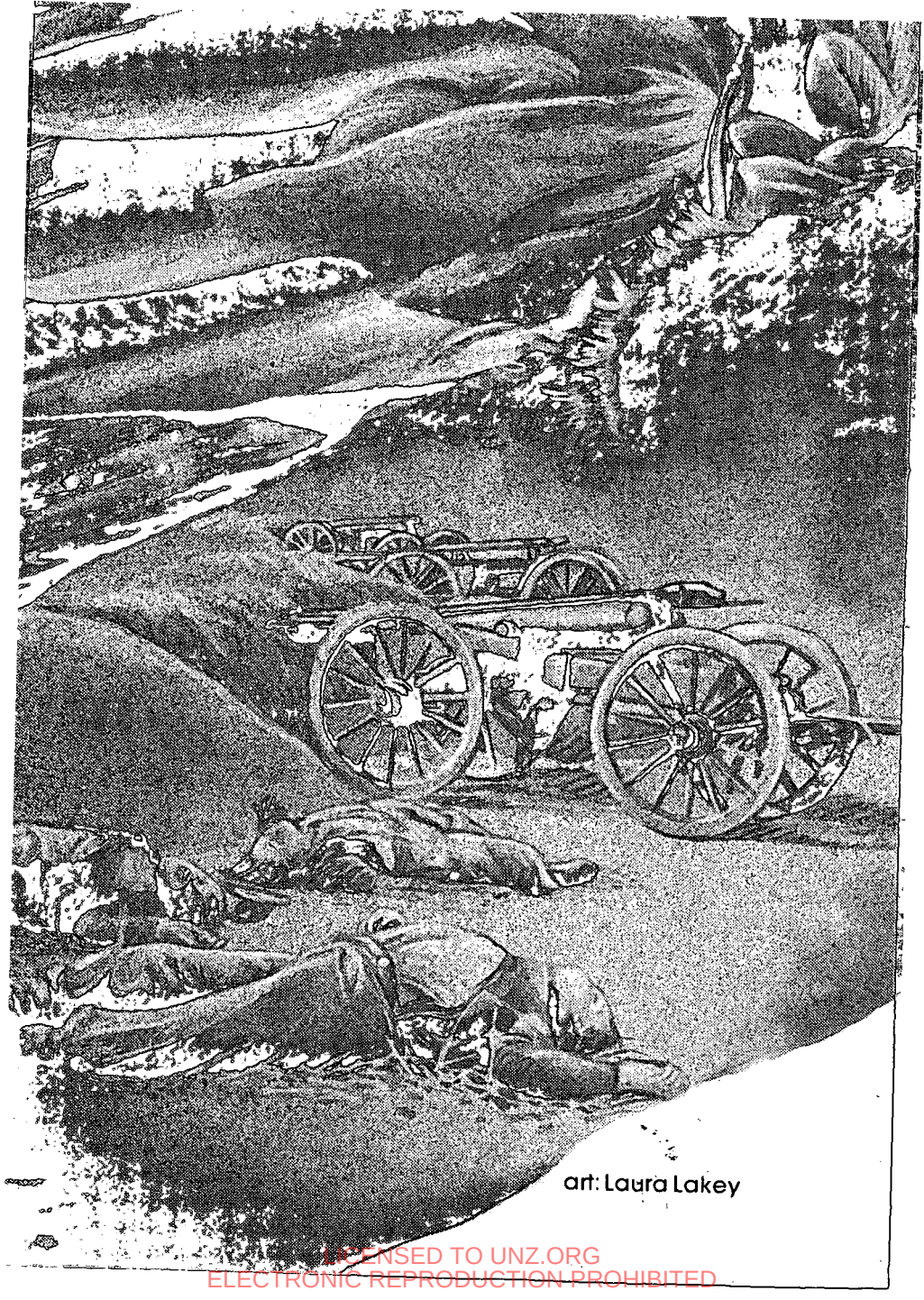

art: Laura Lakey

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NO SPOT OF GROUND

by Walter Jon Williams

"Surfacing," a Hugo-and Nebula-award nominee (April 1988), was Walter Jon Williams's last tale to appear in *IAsfm.* The author's most recent novel, *Angel Station,* was published in hardcover last July by Tor Books. Upcoming from Tor is *Facets,* a collection of short stories by Mr. Williams, which will feature much of the work he originally published in *IAsfm.*

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The dead girl came as a shock to him. He had limped into the Starker house from the firelit military camp that was setting up outside, from a cacophony of wagons rattling, men driving tent pegs, provost marshals setting up the perimeter, a battalion of Ewell's Napoleon guns rolling past, their wheels lifting dust from the old farm road, dust that drifted over the camp, turning the firelight red and the scene into a pictured outpost of Hell . . .

And here, to his surprise, was a dead girl in the parlor. She was perhaps sixteen, with dark hair, translucent skin, cheeks with high spots of phthysis red. Her slim form was dressed in white. She lay in her coffin with candles at her head and feet, and her long-faced relatives sat in a semicircle of chairs under portraits of ancestors and Jefferson Davis.

A gangly man, probably the dead girl's father, rose awkwardly to welcome the surprised stranger, who had wandered into the parlor in hopes of asking for a glass of lemonade.

The intruder straightened in surprise. He took off his soft white hat and held it over his heart. The little gold knots on the ends of the hat cord rattled on the brim like muffled mourning drums.

"I am sorry to intrude on your grief," he said.

The father halted in what he was going to say, nodded, dropped back into his chair. His wife, a heavy woman in dark silk, reached blindly toward him, and took his hand.

The intruder stood for a long moment out of respect, his eyes fixed on the corpse, before he turned and put on his hat and limped out of the house. Once he had thought this sight the saddest of all; once he had written poems about it.

What surprised him now was that it still happened, that people still died this way.

He had forgotten, amid all this unnatural slaughter, that a natural death was possible.

That morning he had brought his four brigades north into Richmond, marching break-step from the Petersburg and Weldon depot south of the James across the long bridge to the Virginia Central depot in the capital Until two days ago he'd commanded only a single brigade in the defense of Petersburg; but poor George Pickett had suffered a collapse after days of nerve-wrenching warfare in his attempt to keep the city safe from Beast Butler's Army of the James; and Pickett's senior brigadier was, perforce, promoted to command of the whole division.

The new commander was fifty-five years old, and even if he was only a division commander till Pickett came back, he was still the oldest in the army.

At school he had been an athlete. Once he swam six miles down the

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James River, fighting against the tide the whole way, in order to outdo Byron's swim across the Hellespont. Now he was too tired and ill to ride a horse except in an emergency, so he moved through the streets of Richmond in a two-wheel buggy driven by Sextus Pompeiius, his personal darky.

He was dressed elegantly, a spotless grey uniform with the wreathed stars of a brigadier on his collar and bright gold braid on the arms, English riding boots, black doeskin gloves. His new white wide-brimmed hat, a replacement for the one shot off his head at Port Walthall Junction twenty days ago, was tilted back atop his high forehead. Even when he was young and couldn't afford anything but old and mended clothes, he had always dressed well, with the taste and style of a gentleman. Sextus had trimmed his grizzled mustache that morning, back in camp along the Petersburg and Weldon, and snipped at the long grey curls that hung over the back of his collar. A fine white-socked thoroughbred gelding, the one he was too ill to ride, followed the buggy on a lead. When he had gone south in 1861 he had come with twelve hundred dollars in gold and silver, and with that and his army pay he had managed to keep himself in modest style for the last three years.

As he rode past the neat brick houses of the city he remembered when it was otherwise. Memories still burned in his mind: the sneers of Virginia planters' sons when they learned his background, of his parents in the theater and stepfather in commerce; his mounting debts when his stepfather Mr. Allan had twice sent him to college, first to the University of Virginia and then to West Point, and then not given him the means to remain; the moment Allan had permitted the household slaves to insult him to his face; and those countless times he wandered the Richmond streets in black despondent reverie, when he couldn't help gazing with suspicion upon the young people he met, never knowing how many of these might be living insults to his stepmother, another of Mr. Allan's plentiful get of bastards . . .

The brigadier looked up as the buggy rattled over rusting iron tracks, and there it was: Ellis & Allan, General Merchants, the new warehouse of bright red brick lying along a Virginia Central siding, its loading dock choked with barrels of army pork. The war that had so devastated the Confederate nation had been kind only to two classes: carrion crows and merchants. The prosperous Ellis & Allan was run by his stepbrothers now, he presumed, possibly in partnership with an assortment of Mr. Allan's bastards—in *that* family, who could say? The brute Allan, pennypinching as a Jew with the morals of a nigger, might well have given part of the business to his illegitimate spawn, if for no other reason than to spite his foster son. Such was the behavior of the commercial classes that infected this city.

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Richmond, he thought violently. Why in the name of heaven are we defending the place? Let the Yanks have it, and let them serve it as Rome served Carthage, burned to the foundations and the scorched plain sown with salt. There are other parts of the South better worth dying for.

Sextus Pompeiius pulled the mare to a halt, and the general limped out of the buggy and leaned on his stick. The Virginia Central yards were filled with trains, the cars shabby, the engines worn. Sad as they were, they would serve to get the division to where it was going, another fifteen miles up the line to the North Anna River, and save on shoe leather while doing it.

The detestable Walter Whitman, the general remembered suddenly, wrote of steam engines in his poems, awful, tangible juggernaut representatives of American progress, spewing smoke and cinders as they roared through the Almighty's pristine wilderness. Whitman hadn't meant engines like these, worn and ancient, leaking steam and oil as they dragged from front to front battalions of soldiers as worn and tattered as the engines. Not trains, but ghost of trains, carrying a ghost division, itself raised more than once from the dead.

Now *that,* the general thought, was a poetic conceit: an army of the dead moving on rusting rails. Nothing like Whitman's appalling visions.

The lead formation, the general's old Virginia brigade, came marching up behind the buggy, colors and band to the front. The bandsmen were playing "Bonnie Blue Flag." The general winced—brass and percussion made his taut nerves shriek, and he could really tolerate only the soft song of stringed instruments. Pain crackled through his temples.

Among the stands of brigade and regimental colors was another stand, or rather a perch, with a pair of black birds sitting quizzically atop: Huginn and Munnir, named after the ravens of Wotan. The brigade called themselves the Ravens, a compliment to their commander.

The general stood on the siding and watched the brigade as it came to a halt and broke ranks. A few smiling bandsmen helped the general load his horses and buggy on a flatcar, then jumped with their instruments aboard their assigned flatcar. The ravens were taken from their perch and put in cages in the back of the general's carriage.

A lance of pain drove through the general's thigh as he swung himself aboard. He found a seat among the divisional staff.

A steam whistle cried like a woman in pain. The tired old train began to move.

Poe's division, formerly Pickett's, began its journey north to fight the Yanks somewhere on the North Anna River. When, the general thought, would these young men see Richmond again?

One of the ravens croaked as it had been taught: "Nevermore!"

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Men laughed. They thought it a good omen.

General Poe stepped out of the mourning Starker house, the pale dead girl still touching his mind. When had he changed? he wondered. When had his heart stopped throbbing in sad, harmonic sympathy at the thought of dead young girls? When had he last wept?

He knew when. He knew precisely when his heart had broken for the last time, when he had ceased at last to mourn Virginia Clemm, when the last ounce of poetry had poured from him like a river of dark veinous blood . . .

When the Ravens had gone for that cemetery, the tombstones hidden in dust and smoke.

When General Edgar A. Poe, CSA, had watched them go, that brilliant summer day, while the bands played "Bonnie Blue Flag" under the trees and the tombstones waited, marking the factories of a billion happy worms . . .

Poe stood before the Starker house and watched the dark form of his fourth and last brigade, the new North Carolina outfit that had shown their mettle at Port Walthall Junction, now come rising up from the old farm road like an insubstantial battalion of mournful shades. Riding at the head came its commander, Thomas Clingman. Clingman saw Poe standing on Starker's front porch, halted his column, rode toward the house, saluted.

"Where in hell do I put my men, General? One of your provost guards said up this way, but . . ."

Poe shook his head. Annoyance snapped like lightning in his mind. No one had given him any orders at all. "You're on the right of General Corse, out there." Poe waved in the general direction of Hanover Junction, the little town whose lights shone clearly just a quarter mile to the east. "You should have gone straight up the Richmond and Fredericksburg tracks from the Junction, not the Virginia Central."

Clingman's veinous face reddened. "They told me wrong, then. Ain't anybody been over the ground, Edgar?"

"No one from *this* division. Ewell pulled out soon's he heard we were coming, but that was just after dark and when we came up, we had no idea what to do. There was just some staff creature with some written orders, and he galloped away before I could ask him what they meant."

No proper instruction, Poe thought. His division was part of Anderson's corps, but he hadn't heard from Anderson and didn't know where the command post was. If he were supposed to report to Lee, he didn't know where Lee was either. He was entirely in the dark.

Contempt and anger snarled in him. Poe had been ignored again. No

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one had thought to consult him; no one had remembered him; but if he failed, everyone would blame him. Just like the Seven Days.

Clingman snorted through his bushy mustache. "Confound it anyway."

Poe banged his stick into the ground in annoyance. "Turn your men around, Thomas. It's only another half-mile or so. Find an empty line of entrenchments and put your people in. We'll sort everyone out come first light."

"Lord above, Edgar."

"Fitz Lee's supposed to be on your right. Don't let's have any of your people start shooting at him by mistake."

Clingman spat in annoyance, then saluted and started the process of getting his brigade turned around. Poe started after him and bit back his own anger. Orders would come. Surely his division hadn't been forgotten.

"Massa Poe?"

Poe gave a start. With all the noise of marching feet and shouted orders, he hadn't heard Sextus Pompeiius creeping up toward him. He looked at his servant and grinned.

"You gave me a scare, Sextus. Strike me if you ain't invisible in the dark."

Sextus chuckled at his master's wit. "I found that cider, Massa Poe."

Poe scowled. If his soft cider hadn't got lost, he wouldn't have had to interrupt the Starkers' wake in search of lemonade. He began limping toward his headquarters tent, his cane sinking in the soft ground.

"Where'd you find it?" he demanded.

"That cider, it was packed in the green trunk, the one that came up with the divisional train."

"I instructed you to pack it in the brown trunk."

"I know that, Massa Poe. That fact must have slipped my mind, somehow."

Poe's hand clenched the ivory handle of his cane. Renewed anger poured like fire through his veins. "Worthless nigger baboon!" he snapped.

"Yes, Massa Poe," nodding, "I is. I *must* be, the way you keep saying I is."

Poe sighed. One really couldn't expect any more from an African. Changing his name from Sam to Sextus hadn't given the black any more brains than God had given him in the first place.

"Well, Sextus," he said, "*Fortuna favet fatuis*, you know." He laughed.

"Massa always has his jokes in Latin. He always does."

Sextus' tone was sulky. Poe laughed and tried to jolly the slave out of his mood.

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"We must improve your knowledge of the classics. Your *litterae humaniores,* you understand."

The slave was annoyed. "Enough human litter around here as it is."

Poe restrained a laugh. "True enough, Sextus." He smiled indulgently. "You are excused your lessons."

His spirits raised by the banter with his darky, Poe limped to his headquarters tent, marked by the division flags and the two ravens on their perch, and let Sextus serve him his evening meal. The ravens gobbled to each other while Poe ate sparingly, drank two glasses of the soft cider. Poe hadn't touched spirits in fifteen years, even though whiskey was a lot easier to find in this army than water.

Not since that last sick, unholy carouse in Baltimore.

Where were his orders? he wondered. He'd just been ordered to occupy Ewell's trenches. Where was the rest of the army? Where was Lee? No one had told him anything.

After the meal, he'd send couriers to find Lee. Somebody had to know something.

It was impossible they'd forgotten him.

Eureka, he called it. His prose poem had defined the universe, explained it all, a consummate theory of matter, energy, gravity, art, mathematics, the mind of God. The universe was expanding, he wrote, had exploded from a single particle in a spray of evolving atoms that moved outward at the speed of divine thought. The universe was still expanding, the forms of its matter growing ever more complex; but the expansion would slow, reverse; matter would coalesce, return to its primordial simplicity; the Divine Soul that resided in every atom would reunite in perfect self-knowledge.

It was the duty of art, he thought, to reunite human thought with that of the Divine, particled with unparticled matter. In his poetry he had striven for an aesthetic purity of thought and sentiment, a detachment from political, moral, and temporal affairs. . . . Nothing of Earth shone in his verse, nothing contaminated by matter—he desired harmonies, essences, a striving for Platonic perfection, for the dialogue of one abstract with another. Beyond the fact that he wrote in English, nothing connected the poems with America, the nineteenth century, its life, its movements. He disdained even standard versification—he wrote with unusual scansions, strange metrics—the harmonies of octameter catalectic, being more rarified, seemed to rise to the lofty ear of God more than could humble iambic pentameter, that endless trudge, trudge, trudge across the surface of the terrestrial globe. He wanted nothing to stand between himself and supernal beauty, nothing to prevent the connection of his own mind with that of God.

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He had poured everything into *Eureka,* all his soul, his hope, his grief over Virginia, his energy. In the end there was the book, but nothing left of the man. He lectured across America, the audiences polite and appreciative, their minds perhaps touched by his own vision of the divine—but all his own divinity had gone into the book, and in the end Earth reached up to claim him. Entire weeks were spent in delirium, reeling drunk from town to town, audience to audience, woman to woman . . .

Ending at last in some Baltimore street, lying across a gutter, his body a dam for a river of half-frozen October sleet.

After the meal Poe stepped outside for a pipe of tobacco. He could see the soft glow of candlelight from the Starker parlor, and he thought of the girl in her coffin, laid out in her dress of virgin white. How much sadder it would have been had she lived, had she been compelled to grow old in this new, changing world, this sad and deformed Iron Age dedicated to steam and slaughter . . . better she was dead, her spirit purged of particled matter and risen to contemplation of the unknowing eternal.

His thoughts were interrupted by the arrival of a man on horseback. Poe recognized Colonel Moxley Sorrel, a handsome Georgian, still in his twenties, who was Longstreet's chief of staff. He had been promoted recently as a result of leading a flank assault in the Wilderness that had crushed an entire Union corps, though his triumph had come too late in the day for the attack to be decisive: this war in sum.

"General." Sorrel saluted. "I had a devil of a time finding you. Ewell had his command post at Hackett's place, over yonder." He pointed at the lights of a plantation house just north of Hanover Junction. "I reckoned you'd be there."

"I had no notion of where Ewell was. No one's told me a thing. This place seemed as likely as any." Poe looked off toward the lights of Hanover Junction. "At least there's a good view."

Sorrel frowned. He swung out of the saddle, and Sextus came to take the reins from his hand. "Staff work has gone up entirely," Sorrel said. "There's been too much chaos at the top for everything to get quite sorted out."

"Yes." Poe looked at him. "And how is General Longstreet?"

The Georgian's eyes were serious. "He will recover, praise God. But it will be many months before he can return to duty."

Poe looked up at the ravens, half-expecting one of them to croak out "Nevermore." But they'd stuck their heads under their wings and gone to sleep.

He will recover, Poe thought. That's what they'd said of Stonewall; and then the crazed Presbyterian had died suddenly.

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Just like old Stonewall to do the unexpected.

The army had been hit hard the last few weeks. First Longstreet wounded in the Wilderness, then Jeb Stuart killed at Yellow Tavern, just a few days ago. They were the two best corps commanders left to Lee, in Poe's opinion. Longstreet had been replaced by Richard Anderson; but Lee had yet to appoint a new cavalry commander—both, in Poe's mind, bad decisions. Anderson was too mentally lazy to command a corps—he was barely fit to command his old division—and the cavalry needed a firm hand now, with their guiding genius gone.

"Will you come inside, Colonel?" Poe gestured toward the tent flap with his stick.

"Thank you, sir."

"Share some cider with me? That and some biscuits are all the *raf-raîchessements* I can manage."

"You're very kind." Sorrel looked at the uncleared table. "I've brought your orders from General Anderson."

Poe pushed aside his gold-rimmed dinner plate and moved a lantern onto the table. Sorrel pulled a folded map out of his coat and spread it on the pale blue tablecloth. Poe reached for his spectacles and put them on his nose. The map gave him, for the first time, an accurate look at his position.

This part of the Southern line stretched roughly northwest to southeast, a chord on an arc of the North Anna. The line was more or less straight, though it was cut in half by a swampy tributary of the North Anna, with steep banks on either side, and at that point Poe's entrenchments bent back a bit. The division occupied the part of the line south of the tributary. In front of him was dense hardwood forest, not very useful for maneuver or the attack.

"We're going on the offensive tomorrow," Sorrel said, "thank the Lord." He gave a thin smile. "Grant's got himself on the horns of a dilemma, sir, and General Lee intends to see he's gored."

Poe's temper crackled. "No one's going to get gored if division commanders don't get their instructions!" he snapped.

Sorrel gave him a wary smile. "That's why I'm here, sir."

Poe glared at him, then deliberately reined in his anger. "So you are." He took a breath. "Pardon my . . . display."

"Staff work, as I say, sir, has been a mite precarious of late. General Lee is ill, and so is General Hill."

Poe's anxiety rose again. "Lee?" he demanded. "Ill?"

"An intestinal complaint. We would have made this attack yesterday had the general been feeling better."

Poe felt his nervousness increase. He was not a member of the Cult of Lee, but he did not trust an army without a capable hand at the top.

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Too many high-ranking officers were out of action or incompetent. Stuart was dead, Longstreet wounded, Lee was sick—great heavens, he'd already had a heart attack—Ewell hadn't been the same since he lost his leg, Powell Hill was ill half the time . . . and the young ones, the healthy ones, were as always dying of bullets and shells.

"Your task, general," Sorrell said, "is simply to hold. Perhaps to demonstrate against the Yanks, if you feel it possible."

"How am I to know if it's possible?" He was still angry. "I don't know the ground. I don't know where the enemy is."

Sorrel cocked an eyebrow at him, said, "Ewell didn't show you anything?" But he didn't wait for an answer before beginning his exposition.

The Army of Northern Virginia, he explained, had been continually engaged with Grant's army for three weeks—first in the Wilderness, then at Spotsylvania, now on the North Anna; during that time there hadn't been a single day without fighting. Every time one of Grant's offensives bogged down, he'd slide his whole army to his left and try again. Two days before, on May 24, Grant had gone to the offensive again, crossing the North Anna both upstream and down of Lee's position.

Grant had obviously intended to overlap Lee on both flanks and crush him between his two wings; but Lee had anticipated his enemy by drawing his army back into a V shape, with the center on the river, and entrenching heavily. When the Yanks saw the entrenchments they'd come to a stumbling halt, their offensive stopped in its tracks without more than a skirmish on either flank.

"You're facing Hancock's Second Corps, here on our far right flank," Sorrel said. His manicured finger jabbed at the map. Hancock appeared to be entirely north of the swampy tributary. "Warren and Wright are on our left, facing Powell Hill. Burnside's Ninth Corps is in the center—he tried to get across Ox Ford on the 24th, but General Anderson's guns overlook the ford and Old Burn called off the fight before it got properly started. Too bad—" Grinning. "Could've been another Fredericksburg."

"We can't hope for more than one Fredericksburg, alas," Poe said. "Not even from Burnside." He looked at the map. "Looks as if the Federals have broken their army into pieces for us."

"Yes, sir. We can attack either wing, and Grant can't reinforce one wing without moving his people across the North Anna twice."

General Lee had planned to take advantage of that with an offensive against half Grant's army. He intended to pull Ewell's corps off the far right, to move most of Anderson's out of the center, and to combine them with Hill's for a strike at Warren and Wright.

The delay, Poe thought, had given the Yanks another twenty-four hours to prepare. Confederates weren't the only ones who knew how to entrench.

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Plans already laid, he thought. Nothing he could do about it.

He looked at the map. Now that Ewell and most of Anderson's people had pulled out, he was holding half the Confederate line with his single division.

"It'll probably work to the good," Sorrel said. "Your division came up to hold the right for us, and that will allow us to put more soldiers into the attack. With your division and Bushrod Johnson's, which came up a few days ago, we've managed to replace all the men we've lost in this campaign so far."

Have the Yankees? Poe wondered.

"When you hear the battle start," Sorrell said, "you might consider making a demonstration against Hancock. Keep him interested in what's happening on his front."

Poe looked up sharply. "One division," he said, "against the Yankee Second Corps? Didn't we have enough of that at Gettysburg?"

"A demonstration, general, not a battle." Politely. "General Anderson has also put under your command the two brigades that are holding the center, should you require them."

"Whose?"

"Gregg's Brigade, and Evander Law's Alabamans."

Poe's mind worked through this. "Are Gregg and Law aware they are under my orders?"

"I presume so."

"Presume," Poe echoed. There was too much *presuming* in this war. He took off his spectacles and put them in his pocket. "Colonel Sorrel," he said, "would you do me the inestimable favor of riding to Gregg and Law tonight and telling them of this? I fear the staff work may not have caught up with General Anderson's good intent."

Sorrel paused, then gave a resigned shrug. "Very well, General. If you desire it."

"Thank you, Colonel." His small triumph made Poe genial. "I believe I have been remiss. I remember promising you cider."

"Yes. A glass would be delightful, thank you."

They sat at the folding table, and Poe called for Sextus to serve. He opened a tin box and offered it to Sorrel. "I have some of Dr. Graham's dietary biscuits, if you desire."

"Thank you, sir. If I may put some in my pockets for later . . . ?"

"Make free of them, sir."

Sorrel, possessing by now an old soldier's reflexes, loaded his pockets with biscuits and then took a hearty swallow of the cider. Sextus refilled his glass.

"General Pickett's campaign south of the James," Sorrel said, "has been much appreciated here."

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"The form of appreciation preferable to us would have been reinforcements from General Lee."

"We were, ah, tangled up with Grant at the time, sir."

"Still, for several days we had two brigades against two entire corps. Two *corps,* sir!" Indignation flared in Poe. His fists knotted in his lap.

"The glory of your victory was all the greater." The Georgian's tone was cautious, his eyes alert.

Condescending, Poe thought. A black anger settled on him like a shroud. These southern gentlemen were always condescending. Poe knew what Sorrel was thinking. It's just Poe, hysterical Codebreaker Poe. *Poe* always thinks he's fighting the whole Yankee army by himself. *Poe* is always sending off messages screaming for help and telling other people what to do. What?—another message from Poe?—it's just the fellow's nerves again, ignore it.

"I've always been proved right!" Poe snapped. "I was *right* during the Seven Days when I said Porter was dug in behind Boatswain Swamp! I was *right* about the Yankee signal codes, I was right about the charge at Gettysburg, and I was right again when I said Butler had come ashore at Bermuda Hundred with two whole Yankee corps! If my superiors would give me a little credit . . ."

"Your advice has always been appreciated," said Sorrel.

"My God!" Poe said. "Poor General Pickett is broken down because of this! It may be months before his nerves recover! Pickett—if he could stand what Lee did to the Division at Gettysburg, one might think he could stand anything! But *this—this* broke him! Great heavens, if Butler had committed more than a fraction of the forces available to him, we would have lost Petersburg, and with Petersburg, Richmond!"

"I do not think this is the place—" Sorrel began.

Too late. Poe's mind filled with the memory of the Yankees coming at the Ravens at Port Walthall Junction, four brigades against Pickett's two, and those four only the advance of Butler's entire army. He remembered the horror of it, the regimental flags of the Federals breaking out of the cover of the trees, brass and bayonets shining in the sun; shellfire bursting like obscene overripe blossoms; the whistling noise made by the tumbling bullet that had carried away Poe's hat; the sight of George Pickett with his face streaked by powder smoke, his long hair wild in the wind, as he realized his flanks were caving in and he was facing another military disaster . . .

"Screaming for reinforcements!" Poe shouted. "We were *screaming* for reinforcements! And what does Richmond send? *Harvey Hill!* Hah! Major General interfering Harvey Hill!"

Sorrel looked at him stonily. The old fight between Poe and Hill was ancient history.

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"Hill is a madman, sir!" Poe knew he was talking too much, gushing like a chain pump, but he couldn't stop himself. Let at least one person know what he thought. "He is a fighter, I will grant him that, but he is quarrelsome, tempestuous—impossible to reason with. He is not a rational man, colonel. He hasn't an ounce of rationality or system in him. No more brains than a nigger."

Sorrel finished his cider, raised a hand to let Sextus know not to pour him more. "We may thank God that the movement was made by Butler," he said.

Poe looked at him. "The Yankees will not forever give their armies to men like Butler," he said.

Sorrel gazed resentfully at the lantern for a long moment. "Grant is no Butler, that is certain. But we will do a Chancellorsville on him nonetheless."

"We may hope so," said Poe. He had no confidence in this offensive—Lee no longer had the subordinates to carry things out properly, could no longer do anything in the attack but throw his men headlong at Federal entrenchments.

The young colonel rose. "Thank you for the cider, general. I will visit Generals Law and Gregg on my return journey."

Poe rose with him, memory still surging through his mind like the endless waves of Yankee regiments at Port Walthall Junction. He knew he had not made a good impression, that he had confirmed in Sorrel's mind, and through him the minds of the corps staff, the stories of his instability, his hysteria and egotism.

Harvey Hill, he thought, seething. Send Harvey Hill to tell *me* what to do.

Sextus brought Colonel Sorrel his horse and helped the young man mount. "Thank you for speaking to Gregg and Law," Poe said.

"Use their forces as you see fit," Sorrel said.

"This division has had hard fighting," Poe said. "I will be sparing in my use of them."

"We've all had hard fighting, sir," Sorrel said. A gentle reproach. "But with God's help we will save Richmond again this next day."

Poe gave a swift, reflexive glance to the ravens, anticipating another "Nevermore," but saw they were still asleep. No more omens tonight.

Sorrel saluted, Poe returned it, and the Georgian trotted off into the night.

Poe looked out at the Yankee campfires burning low off on his left. How many times, he wondered, would this army have to save Richmond? McDowell had come for Richmond, and McClellan, and Pope, Burnside, Hooker, Meade, and Butler. Now there was Grant, who had seized hold

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of Lee's army in the Wilderness and declined to let it go, even though he'd probably lost more men than the others put together.

Maybe Lee would turn tomorrow into another Chancellorsville.

But even if he did, Poe knew, one day this or another Yank general would come, and Richmond would not be saved. Even Lee could only fight history for so long.

The politicians were counting on the Northern elections to save them, but Poe had no more confidence in George McClellan as a candidate than as a general—Lincoln could outmaneuver him at the polls as handily as Lee had in the Seven Days.

No, the South was doomed, its Cause lost. That was obvious to anyone with any ratiocinative faculty whatever. But there was nothing else to do but fight on and hope the North kept giving armies to the likes of Ben Butler.

"Massa Poe?" Sextus was at his elbow. "Will we be sleeping outside tonight?"

Poe cocked an eye at the sky. There was a heavy dew on the ground, but the few clouds in sight were high and moving fast. There should be no rain.

"Yes," Poe said. "Set up the beds."

"Whatever you say, Massa."

Sextus was used to it, poor fellow. Poe hadn't been able to sleep alone since Virginia died, and he had always disliked confined spaces. Sleeping out of doors, under a heavy buffalo cloak, with Sextus wrapped in another robe nearby, was the ideal solution. Poe loved to look up at the sweep of brilliant stars, each an eye of God, to feel his soul rising beyond the atmosphere, through the luminiferous ether to merge with the Eternal, the Sublime . . .

How he came to the gutter in Baltimore he would never know. He had apparently given a lecture there a few nights before, but he couldn't remember it. Perhaps he would have died there, had not a passing widow recognized him, drunk and incapable, and brought him into her carriage. She had talked with him after his lecture, she told him, and found his conversation brilliant. He couldn't remember her either.

Her name was Mrs. Forster. Her late husband had been addicted to alcohol, and she had cured him; she would apply her cure as well to Mr. Poe.

Her plantation, within a half-day's journey of Baltimore, was called Shepherd's Rest: she owned close to two thousand slaves and the better part of a county. She loved poetry and philosophy, read French and German, and had a passing knowledge of Latin.

She had a daughter named Evania, a green-eyed girl of fourteen. When

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Poe first saw her, sitting in the East parlor with the French wallpaper only a shade darker than her eyes, Evania was playing the guitar, her long fingers caressing the strings as if they were a lover's hair. Her long tresses, falling down her neck, seemed to possess the mutable spectrum of a summer sunrise.

Once before Poe, at the end of his wits and with the black hand of self-slaughter clutching at his throat, had been rescued by a widow with a daughter. In Mrs. Forster Poe could almost see Mrs. Clemm—but Mrs. Clemm idealized, perfected, somehow rarified, her poverty replaced by abundance, her sadness by energy, inspiration, and hope. How could he help but see Virginia in her sparkling daughter? How could he help but give her his love, his troth, his ring—he was not being faithless to Virginia, he thought; his second marriage was a fulfillment of the first. Did Evania and Virginia not possess, through some miracle of transubstantiation, the same soul, the same perfection of spirit? Were they not earthly shades of the same pure, angelic lady, differing only in color, one dark, one bright?

Were they not blessings bestowed by Providence, a just compensation for poor Poe, who had been driven nearly mad by soaring, like Icarus, too near the divine spark?

For a moment, after Poe opened his eyes, he saw her floating above him—a woman, dark-tressed, pale-featured, crowned with stars. He could hear her voice, though distantly; he could not make sense of her speech, hearing only a murmur of long vowel sounds . . .

And then she was gone, faded away, and Poe felt a knife of sorrow enter his heart. He realized he was weeping. He threw off his buffalo robe and rolled upright.

The Starker house loomed above him, black against the Milky Way. The candles' glow still softly illuminated the parlor window.

Poe bent over, touching his forehead to his knees until he could master himself. He had seen the woman often in his dreams, sometimes in waking moments—he remembered her vividly, the female form rising over the streets of Richmond, during some barely-sane moments after Virginia's death, the prelude to that last spree in Baltimore. Always he had felt comforted by her presence, confirmed in his dreams, his visions. When she appeared it was to confer a blessing.

He did not remember seeing her since his war service started. But then, his war service was not blessed.

Poe straightened, looked at the soft candlelight in the Starker windows. He looked at the foot of his cot, saw Sextus wrapped in blankets, asleep and oblivious to his master's movements. Sometimes Poe thought he

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would give half his worth for a single night of sleep as deep and dreamless as that of his bodyservant.

He put his stockinged feet in the carpet slippers that waited where Sextus had put them, then rose and stepped out into the camp in his dressing gown. The slippers were wet with dew inside and out. Poe didn't care. A gentle, warm wind was flitting up from the south—with this heavy dew, Poe thought, the wind would raise a mist before dawn. Maybe it would postpone Lee's offensive.

He remembered hiking in New York with Virginia, spending days wandering down hilly lanes, spending their nights in country inns or, when the weather was fine and Virginia's health permitted, wrapped in blankets beneath the open sky. His friends had thought his interest in nature morbid—buried in the life of the city and drawn skyward by the experience of the outdoors, how close he felt to the Creator when he and Virginia shared a soft bank of moist timothy and kissed and caressed one another beneath the infinite range of fiery stars . . .

Poe realized he was weeping again. He looked about and saw he had wandered far from his tent, amid his soldiers' dying campfires.

Nothing like this had happened to him in years. The sight of that dead girl had brought back things he thought he'd forgotten.

He mastered himself once more and walked on. The rising southern wind stirred the grey ashes of campfires, brought little sparks winking across his path. He followed them, heading north.

Eventually he struck his entrenchments, a deep line of the kind of prepared works this army could now throw up in a few hours, complete with head log, communications trenches, firing step, and parapet. Soldiers huddled like potato sacks in the trenches, or on the grass just behind the line. An officer's mare dozed over its picket. Beyond, Poe could hear the footsteps of the sentries patrolling.

Once, just after the war had first started, Robert Lee had tried to get this army to dig trenches—and the soldiers had mocked him, called him "The King of Spades," and refused to do the work. Digging was no fit work for a white man, they insisted, and besides, only a coward would fight from entrenchments.

Now the army entrenched at every halt. Three years' killing had made them lose their stupid pride.

Poe stepped onto the firing step, peered out beneath the head log as he tried to scan his front. Beyond the vague impression of gentle rolling hills beyond, he could see little. Then he lifted his head as he heard the challenging scream of a stallion. The sound came from away north, well past the entrenchments.

The mare picketed behind the entrenchments raised its head at the

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sound. The stallion challenged again. Then another horse screamed, off to the right, and another. The mare flicked its ears and gave an answer.

The mare is in heat, Poe realized. And she is flirting with Yankee horses. None of my men could be out that far.

The wind had carried the mare's scent north, to the nose of one northern stallion. Other stallions that hadn't scented the mare nevertheless answered the first horse's challenge.

Poe's head moved left to right as one horse after another screamed into the night. Sorrel's map hadn't shown the Yankee line stretching that far, well south of the tributary, beyond Clingman's brigade to where Fitz Lee's cavalry was supposed to be, out on his right flank.

He listened as the horses called to one another like bugles before a battle, and he thought: the Yankees are moving, and they're moving along my front.

Suddenly the warm south wind turned chill.

How many? he thought.

Sobbing in the mist like men in the extremes of agony, the crying horses offered no answer.

He became a child again, living with Evania in her perfect kingdom, that winding blue river valley west of Baltimore. Never before had he known rest; but here he found it, a cease from the despairing, agonized wanderings that had driven him, like a leaf before a black autumn storm, from Richmond to Boston and every city between.

At last he knew what it was to be a gentleman. He had *thought* he had achieved that title before, through education and natural dignity and inclination—but now he knew that before he had only aspired to the name. Mr. Allan fancied himself a gentleman; but his money was tainted with trade, with commerce and usury. Now Poe understood that the highest type of gentleman was produced only through ease and leisure—not laziness, but rather the freedom from material cares that allowed a man to cultivate himself endlessly, to refine his thought and intellect through study and application of the highest forms of human aspiration.

He was not lazy. He occupied himself in many ways. He moved Mrs. Clemm to Baltimore, bought her a house, arranged for her an annuity. He added to the mansion, creating a new façade of Italian marble that reflected the colors of the westering sun; he employed the servants to move tons of earth in order to create a landscape garden of fully forty acres that featured, in the midst of a wide artificial lake, an arabesque castle, a lacy wedding-cake gift to his bride.

He had always thought landscape gardening fully an equal of poetry in its ability to invoke the sublime and reveal the face of the deity. In

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this he was a disciple of de Carbonniéres, Piranesi, and Shenstone: the garden was nature perfected, as it had been in the mind of God, a human attempt to restore the divine, Edenic sublimity. He crafted his effects carefully—the long, winding streams through which one approached Poe's demi-paradise in swan-shaped boats, the low banks crowded with moss imported from Japan, natural-seeming outcroppings of uniquely colored and textured rock. At the end was a deep, black chasm through which the water rushed alarmingly, as if to Hades—but then the boat was swept into the dazzling wide lake, the sun sparkling on the white sandbanks, the blue waters—and then, as the visitor's eyes adjusted from blackness to brightness, one perceived in the midst of a blue-green island the white castle with its lofty, eyelike windows, the symbol of purest Mind in the midst of Nature.

Nothing was suffered to spoil the effects that had taken a full six years to create. Not a stray leaf, not a twig, not a cattail was permitted to sully the ground or taint the water—fully thirty Africans were constantly employed to make certain that Poe's domain was swept clean.

It cost money—but money Poe had, and if not there was always more to be obtained at three and one-half percent. His days of penny-counting were over, and he spent with a lavish hand.

He fulfilled another ambition: he started a literary magazine, the *Southern Gentleman,* with its offices in Baltimore. For it he wrote essays, criticism, occasional stories, once or twice a poem.

Only once or twice.

Somehow, he discovered, the poetry had fled his soul.

And he began to feel, to his growing horror, that his loss of poetry was nothing but a just punishment. True poetry, he knew, could not reside in the breast of a man as faithless as he.

The Starker house on its small eminence stood hard-edged and black against a background of shifting mist, like an isolated tor rising above the clouds. It was a little after four: the sun had not yet risen, but already the eastern horizon was beginning to turn grey. The ravens, coming awake, cackled and muttered to one another as they shook dew from their feathers.

Poe leaned on his stick before a half-circle of his brigadiers and their mingled staffs. Huginn and Munnir sat on their perch behind him. Poe was in his uniform of somber grey, a new paper collar, a black cravat, the black doeskin gloves. Over his shoulders he wore a red-lined black cloak with a high collar, an old gift from Jeb Stuart, who had said it made him look like a proper raven.

Most of his life Poe had dressed all in black. The uniform was a concession to his new profession, but for sake of consistency with his earlier

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mode of dress he had chosen the darkest possible grey fabric, so dark it was almost blue.

The sound of galloping: riders rose out of the mist. Poe recognized the man in the lead—Fitzhugh Lee, Robert Lee's nephew and the commander of the cavalry division on his right. Lee was a short man, about Poe's height, a bandy-legged cavalryman with a huge spade-shaped beard and bright, twinkling eyes. Poe was surprised to see the cavalryman, having asked only that Lee send him a staff officer.

Lee and Poe exchanged salutes. "Decided to come myself, general." He dropped from his horse. "Your messenger made it seem mighty important."

"I thank you, sir." Fitz Lee, Poe realized, outranked him. He could take command here if he so desired.

He would not *dare,* Poe thought. A cold anger burned through him for a moment before he recollected that Fitz Lee had as yet done nothing to make him angry.

Still, Poe was uneasy. He could be superceded so easily.

"I think the Yankees are moving across my front," he said. He straightened his stiff leg, felt a twinge of pain. "I think Grant is moving to his left again."

The cavalryman considered this. "If he wants Richmond," he said, "he'll go to his right. The distance is shorter."

"I would like to submit, *apropos,* that Grant may not want Richmond so much as to defeat us in the field."

Fitz Lee puzzled his way through this. "He's been fighting us nonstop, that's the truth. Hasn't broken off so much as a day."

"Nevermore," said one of the ravens. Fitz Lee looked startled. Poe's men, used to it, shared grins. Poe's train of thought continued uninterrupted.

"Moreover, if Grant takes Hanover Junction, he will be astride both the Virginia Central and the Richmond & Fredericksburg. That will cut us off from the capital and our sources of supply. We'll either have to attack him there or fall back on Richmond."

"Mebbe that's so."

"All that, of course, is speculation—a mere exercise of the intuition, if you like. Nevertheless, whatever his intent, it is still an *observed* fact that Grant is moving across my front. *Quod erat demonstratum.*"

Lee's eyes twinkled. "*Quodlibet,* I think, rather." Not quite convinced.

"I have heard their horses. They are well south of where they are supposed to be."

Lee smiled through his big beard and dug a heel into the turf. "If he's moving past you, he'll run into my two brigades. I'm planted right in his path."

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There was a saying in the army, *Who ever saw a dead cavalryman?* Poe thought of it as he looked at Lee. "Can you hold him?" he asked.

"Nevermore," said a raven.

Lee's smile turned to steel. "With all respect to your pets, general, I held Grant at Spotsylvania."

Gravely, Poe gave the cavalryman an elaborate, complimentary bow, and Lee returned it. Poe straightened and hobbled to face his brigade commanders.

Perhaps he had Fitz Lee convinced, perhaps not. But he knew—and the knowledge grated on his bones—that Robert Lee would not be convinced. Not with Poe's reputation for hysteria, for seeing Yankees everywhere he looked. The army commander would just assume his high-strung imagination had seen illusory armies behind every swirl of mist. As much as Poe hated it, he had to acknowledge this.

"General Lee has made his plans for today," he said. "He will attack to the west, where he conceives General Grant to be. He may not choose to believe any message from his other wing that the Yanks are moving."

Poe waited for a moment for a reply from the cavalryman. Fitz Lee was the commanding general's nephew: perhaps he could trade on the family connection somehow. But the bearded man remained silent.

"They are going to strike us, that is obvious," Poe said. "Grant has his back to the bend of the river, and he'll have to fight his way into the clear. But his men will have to struggle through the woods, and get across that swamp and the little creek, and they're doing it at night, with a heavy mist. They will not be in position to attack at first light. I suggest, therefore, that we attack him as soon as the mist clears, if not before. It may throw him off-balance and provide the evidence we need to convince the high command that Mr. Grant has stolen a march upon us."

"Nevermore," said the ravens. "Nevermore."

Poe looked at Sextus, who was standing respectfully behind the half-circle of officers. "Feed the birds," he said. "It may keep them quiet."

"Yes, Massa."

"General Poe." Fitz Lee was speaking. "There are two bridges across that creek—small, but they'll take the Yankees across. The water won't hold up the Yanks as long as you might think."

Poe looked at him. "The bridges were not burned after Hancock crossed the North Anna?"

Lee was uneasy. "General Ewell may have done it without my knowledge."

"If the bridges exist, that's all the more reason to attack as soon as we can."

"General." Clingman raised a hand. "Our brigades marched up in the

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dark. We ain't aligned, and we'll need to sort out our men before we can go forward."

"First light, general," said Poe. "Arrange your men, then go forward. We'll be going through forest, so give each man about two feet of front. Send out one combined company per regiment to act as skirmishers—we'll want to overwhelm their pickets and get a look at what lies in there before our main body strikes them."

Another brigadier piped up. "What do we align on, sir?"

"The rightmost brigade of the Division—that's Barton's?" Heads nodded. Poe continued, gesturing into the mist with his stick, sketching out alignments. "Barton will align on the creek, and everyone will guide on him. When Barton moves forward, the others will move with him." He turned to Gregg and Law, both of whom were looking dubious. "I cannot suggest to Generals Gregg and Law how to order their forces. I have not been over the ground."

Law folded his arms. "General. You're asking us to attack a Yankee corps that's had two days to entrench."

"And not just any corps," Gregg added. "This is *Hancock*."

"We'll be outnumbered eight to one," Law said. "And we don't have any woods to approach through, the way y'all do. We'll have to cross a good quarter-mile of open ground before we can reach them."

Poe looked at him blackly. Frustration keened in his heart. He took a long breath and fought down his growing rage.

Winfield Scott Hancock, he thought, known to the Yanks as Hancock the Superb. The finest of the Yankee commanders. He thought about the Ravens going up that little green slope toward the cemetery, with Hancock and his corps waiting on top, and nodded.

"Do as best as you can, gentlemen," he said. "I leave it entirely to you. I wish only that you show some activity. Drive in his pickets. Let him see some regimental flags, think he is going to be attacked."

Law and Gregg looked at one another. "Very well, sir," Law said.

Anger stabbed Poe again. They'd do nothing. He knew it; and if he ordered them into a fight they'd just appeal over his head to Anderson.

Nothing he could do about it. Keep calm.

Poe turned towards Fitz Lee. "I hope I may have your support."

The small man nodded. "I'll move some people forward." He gave a smile. "My men won't like being in that woods. They're used to clear country."

"Any additional questions?"

There were none. Poe sent his generals back to their commands and thanked Fitzhugh Lee for his cooperation.

"This may be the Wilderness all over again," Lee said. "Woods so heavy

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no one could see a thing. Just one big ambush with a hundred thousand men flailing around in the thickets."

"Perhaps the Yankees will not see our true numbers, and take us for a greater force," Poe said.

"We may hope, sir." Lee saluted, mounted, and spurred away.

Poe found himself staring at the black Starker house, that one softly-lit eye of a window. Thinking of the dead girl inside, doomed to be buried on a battlefield.

Virginia Poe had been beautiful, so beautiful that sometimes Poe's heart would break just to look at her. Her skin was translucent as bone china, her long hair fine and black as midnight, her violet eyes unnaturally large, like those of a bird of Faërie. Her voice was delicate, as fragile and evanescent as the tunes she plucked from her harp. Virginia's aspect was unearthly, refined, ethereal, like an angel descended from some Musselman paradise, and as soon as Poe saw his cousin he knew he could never rest unless he had that beauty by him always.

When he married her she was not quite fourteen. When she died, after five years of advancing consumption, she was not yet twenty-five. Poe was a pauper. After Virginia's death came *Eureka,* dissipation, madness. He had thought he could not live without her, had no real intention of doing so.

But now he knew he had found Virginia again, this time in Evania. With Evania, as with Virginia, he could throw off his melancholy and become playful, gentle, joyful. With her he could sit in the parlor with its French wallpaper, play duets on the guitar, and sing until he could see the glow of his happiness reflected in Evania's eyes.

But in time a shadow seemed to fall between them. When Poe looked at his young bride, he seemed to feel an oppression on his heart, a catch in the melody of his love. Virginia had not asked for anything in life but to love her cousin. Evania was proud, she was willful; she grew in body and intellect. She developed tastes, and these tastes were not those of Poe. Virginia had been shy, otherworldly, a presence so ethereal it seemed as if the matter had been refined from her, leaving only the essence of perfected beauty and melancholy; Evania was a forthright presence, bold, a tigress in human form. She was a material presence; her delights were entirely those of Earth.

Poe found himself withdrawing before Evania's growing clarity. He moved their sleeping chamber to the topmost floor of the mansion, beneath a roof of glass skylights. The glass ceiling was swathed in heavy Oriental draperies to keep out the heat of the day; the windows were likewise covered. Persian rugs four deep covered the floor. Chinese

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bronzes were arranged to pour gentle incense into the room from the heads of dragons and lions.

With the draperies blocking all sources of the light, in the near-absolute, graveyard darkness, Poe found he could approach his wife. The fantastic decor, seen only by such light as slipped in under the door or through cracks in the draperies, heightened Poe's imagination to a soaring intensity. He could imagine that the hair he caressed was dark as a raven's wing; that the cheek he softly kissed was porcelain-pale; he could fancy, under the influence of the incense, that the earthy scent of Evania had been transformed to a scent far more heavenly; and he could almost perceive, as ecstasy flooded him, that the eyes that looked up into his were the large, luminous, angelic eyes of his lost love, the lady Virginia.

Poe sat in his tent and tried to eat an omelette made of eggs scavenged from Starker chickens. Fried ham sat untouched on the plate. Around him, the reserve divisional artillery creaked and rattled as the guns were set up on the Starkers' slight eminence. The ravens gobbled and cawed.

Poe put down his fork. He was too agitated to eat.

A drink, he thought. A soothing glass of sherry. The Starkers must have some; it would be easy to obtain.

He took a gulp of boiled coffee, took his stick, and hobbled out of the tent. The sky had lightened, and the mist had receded from the Starker plantation; Poe could see parts of his own line, a flag here and there, the crowns of trees. His men were moving forward out of their trenches, forming up on the far side of the abatis beyond. Officers' shouts carried faintly to his ear. The alignment was proceeding with difficulty. The battalions had become too confused as they marched to their places in the dark.

He remembered the Ravens in the cemetery, hidden by grey gunsmoke as they were now hidden by grey mist.

Sherry, he thought again. The thought seemed to fill his mind with a fine, clear light. He could almost feel the welcome fire burning along his veins. A drink would steady him.

A color sergeant came running up from the Ravens, saluted, took the two birds away to march with their brigade. Limbers rattled as horses pulled them out of harm's way down the reverse slope of the hill. Artillerymen lounged by their Napoleons and Whitworths, waiting for a target.

My God, Poe thought, why am I doing this? Suddenly it seemed the most pointless thing in the world. An offensive would only make things worse.

A horseman trotted toward him from the Starker driveway. Poe rec-

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ognized Moses, another of Anderson's aides, an eagle-nosed miniature sheeny that Longstreet had unaccountably raised to the rank of major. One of Longstreet's little lapses in taste, Poe thought; but unfortunately, as someone with pretensions to the title himself, he was honor-bound to treat the Hebrew as if his claim to the title of gentleman were genuine.

Sextus took Major Moses' horse, and Moses and Poe exchanged salutes. There weren't many men shorter than Poe, but Moses was one of them—he was almost tiny, with hands and feet smaller than a woman's. "General Anderson's compliments, sir," Moses said. "He wants to emphasize his desire for a diversionary attack."

"Look about you, major," Poe said. "What do you see?"

Moses looked at the greyback soldiers rolling out of their entrenchments and shuffling into line, the artillerists waiting on the hilltop for a target, officers calling up and down the ranks.

"I see that General Anderson has been anticipated, sir," Moses said. "My mission has obviously been in vain."

"I would be obliged if you'd wait for a moment, major," Poe said. "I may have a message for General Anderson by and by."

"With permission, sir, I should withdraw. The general may need me." Moses smiled. Dew dripped from his shoulder-length long hair onto his blue riding cape. "Today promises to be busy, sir."

"I need you *here,* sir!" Poe snapped. "I want you to witness something."

Moses seemed startled. He recovered, a sly look entering his eyes, then he nodded. "Very well, sir."

In a motionless instant of perfect clarity, Poe understood the conspiracy of this calculating Jew. Moses would hang back, wait for confirmation of Poe's madness, Poe's error, then ride back to Anderson to try to have Poe removed from command. Moxley Sorrel might already have filled the staff tent with tales of Poe's nerves about to crack. Perhaps, Poe thought furiously, the sheeny intended to replace Poe with *himself!*

Cold triumph rolled through Poe. Conspire though Moses might, Poe would be too crafty for him.

"When will the attack begin, major?" Poe asked.

"It has already begun, sir. The mist cleared early to the west of us. The men were moving out just as I left General Anderson's headquarters."

Poe cocked his head. "I hear no guns, Major Moses."

"Perhaps there has been a delay. Perhaps—" Moses shrugged. "Perhaps the wet ground is absorbing the sound. Or there is a trick of the wind—"

"Nevertheless," Poe said, "I hear no guns."

"Yes, sir." Moses cleared his throat. "It is not unknown, sir."

"Still, Major Moses," said Poe. "I hear no guns."

Moses fell silent at this self-evident fact. Poe whirled around, his black

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cape flying out behind him, and stalked toward his tent. He could hear Moses' soft footsteps following behind.

Men on horseback came, reporting one brigade after another ready to move forward. Poe told them to wait here for the word to advance, then return to their commanders. Soon he had heard from every brigade but those of Gregg and Law—a messenger even came from Fitz Lee, reporting the cavalryman's readiness to move forward at Poe's signal. After ten minutes of agitated waiting, while the sky grew ever paler and the mist retreated to lurk among the trees, Poe sent an aide to inquire.

Poe gave an irritated look at his division waiting in their ranks for the signal. If the enemy had scouts out this way, they'd see the Confederates ready for the attack and warn the enemy.

Go forward with the four brigades he had? he wondered.

Yes. No.

He decided to wait till his aide came back. He looked at his watch, then cast a glance over his shoulder at Major Moses.

"I hear no guns, major," he said.

"You are correct, sir." Moses smiled thinly. "I take it you intend to enlighten me as to the significance of this?"

Poe nodded benignly. "In time, major."

Moses swept off his hat in an elaborate bow. "You are known as the master of suspense, sir. I take my hat off, sir, I positively do."

Poe smiled. The Jew was amusing. He tipped his own hat. "Thank you, major."

Moses put on his hat. "I am an enthusiast of your work, sir. I have a first edition of the *Complete Tales*. Had I known I would encounter you, I would have had my wife send it to me and begged you to inscribe it."

"I should be glad to sign it," Poe said, surprised. The *Complete and Corrected Tales and Poems of Edgar A. Poe* had been published at his own expense six years ago and had sold precisely two hundred and forty-nine copies throughout the United States—he knew precisely, because the rest of the ten-thousand-copy edition was sitting in a lumber room back home at Shepherd's Rest.

"Before the war," Moses said, "I used to read your work aloud to my wife. The poems were particularly lovely, I thought—so delicate. And there was nothing that would bring a blush to her lovely cheek—I *particularly* appreciate that, sir." Moses grew indignant. "There are too many passages from poets that one cannot in decency read to a lady, sir. Even in Shakespeare—" Moses shook his head.

"Fortunately," said Poe, "one has Bowdler."

"I thank that gentleman from my heart," said Moses. "As I thank Tennyson, and Mr. Dickens, and Keats."

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"Keats." Poe's heart warmed at the mention of the name. "One scarcely could anticipate encountering his name here, on a battlefield."

"True, sir. He is the most rarefied and sublime of poets—along, I may say, with yourself, sir."

Startled, Poe gazed at Major Moses. "You flatter me, major."

"I regret only that you are not more appreciated, sir." His tiny hands gestured whitely in the air. "Some of my correspondents have informed me, however, that you are better known in Europe."

"Yes," Poe said. A dark memory touched him. "A London publisher has brought out an edition of the *Complete Tales*. Unauthorized, of course. It has achieved some success, but I never received so much as a farthing from it."

"I am surprised that such a thing can happen, sir."

Poe gave a bitter laugh. "It isn't the money—it is the brazen provocation of it that offended me. I hired a London solicitor and had the publisher prosecuted."

"I hope he was thrown in jail, sir."

Poe gave a smile. "Not quite. But there will be no more editions of my work in London, one hopes."

"I trust there won't be."

"Or in France, either. I was being translated there by some overheated poet named Charles Baudelaire—no money from that source, either, by the way—and the fellow had the effrontery to write me that many of my subjects, indeed entire texts, were exactly the same as those he had himself composed—except mine, of course, had been written earlier."

"Curious." Moses seemed unclear as to what he should make of this.

"This *gueux* wrote that he considered himself my *alter ego*." A smile twisted across Poe's face at the thought of his triumph. "I wrote that what *he* considered miraculous, *I* considered plagiarism, and demanded that he cease any association with my works on penalty of prosecution. He persisted in writing to me, so I had a French lawyer send him a stiff letter, and have not heard from him since."

"Very proper." Moses nodded stoutly. "I have always been dismayed at the thought of so many of these disreputable people in the literary world. Their antics can only distract the public from the true artists."

Poe gazed in benevolent astonishment at Major Moses. Perhaps he had misjudged the man.

A horseman was riding toward him. Poe recognized the spreading mustachios of the aide he'd sent to Gregg and Law. The young man rode up, saluted breathlessly.

"I spoke to General Law, sir," he said. "His men were still eating breakfast. He and General Gregg have done *nothing*, sir, *nothing!*"

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Poe stiffened in electric fury. "You will order Generals Gregg and Law to attack *at once!*" he barked.

The aide smiled. "Sir!" he said, saluted, and turned his horse. Dirt clods flew from the horse's hooves as he pelted back down the line.

Poe hobbled toward his four messengers his brigadiers had sent to him. Anger smoked through his veins. "General Barton will advance at once," he said. "The other brigades will advance as soon as they perceive his movement has begun. Tell your commanders that I desire any prisoners to be sent to me at once." He pointed at Fitzhugh Lee's aide with his stick. "Ride to General Lee. Give him my compliments, inform him that we are advancing, and request his support."

Men scattered at his words, like shrapnel from his explosion of temper. He watched them with cold satisfaction.

"There is nothing more beautiful, sir," said Major Moses in his ear, "than the sight of this army on the attack."

Poe looked with surprise at Moses: in his burst of temper he had forgotten the man was here. He turned to gaze at the formed men a few hundred yards below him on the gentle slope. They had been in garrison for almost a year, and their uniforms and equipment were in better condition than most of this scarecrow army—they were not beautiful in any sense that Poe knew of the word, but he knew what the major meant. There was a beauty in warfare that existed in a realm entirely distinct from the killing.

"I know you served in Greece, sir," Moses said. "Did the Greek fighters for liberty compare in spirit with our own?"

Poe's heart gave a lurch, and he wondered in alarm if his ears were burning. "They were—indifferent," he said. "Variable." He cleared his throat. "Mercenary, if the truth be told."

"Ah," Moses nodded. "Byron found that also."

"I believe he did." Poe stared at the ground and wondered how to extricate himself. His Greek service was a lie he had encouraged to be published about himself—he had never fought in Greece when young, or served, as he had also claimed, in the Russian army. Instead—penniless, an outcast, thrown on his own resources by his Shylock of a stepfather—he had enlisted in the American army out of desperation, and served three years as a volunteer.

It had been his dread, these years he'd served the Confederacy, that he would encounter some old soldier who remembered serving alongside the eighteen-year-old Private Edgar A. Perry. His fears had never been realized, fortunately, but he had read everything he could on Byron and the Greek War of Independence in hopes he would not be tripped up by the curious.

"Ah," Poe said. He pointed with his stick. "The men are moving."

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"A brilliant sight, sir." Moses' eyes shone.

Calls were rolling up the line, one after another, from Barton on the left to the Ravens next in line, then to Corse—all Virginia brigades—and then to Clingman's North Carolinans on the right. Poe could hear the voices distinctly.

"Attention, battalion of direction! Forward, guide centerrr—*march!*"

The regiments moved forward, left to right, clumps of skirmishers spreading out ahead. Flags hung listlessly in the damp. Once the order to advance had been given, the soldiers moved in utter silence, in perfect parade-ground formation.

Just as they had gone for that cemetery, Poe thought. He remembered his great swell of pride at the way the whole division had done a left oblique under enemy fire that day, taking little half-steps to swing the entire line forty-five degrees, and then paused to dress the line before marching onward.

Sweeping through tendrils of mist that clung to the soldiers' legs, the division crossed the few hundred yards of ground between the entrenchments and the forest, and disappeared into the darkness and mist.

Poe wondered desperately if he were doing the right thing.

"Did you know Byron, sir?" Moses again.

Poe realized he'd been holding his breath, anticipating the sound of disaster as soon as his men began their attack. He let his breath go, felt relief spreading outward, like rot, from his chest.

"Byron died," he said, "some years before I went abroad."

Byron had been feeding worms for forty years, Poe thought, but there were Byrons still, hundreds of them, in this army. Once he had been a Byron himself—an American Childe Harold dressed in dramatic black, ready with the power of his mind and talent to defeat the cosmos. Byron had intended to conquer the Musselman; Poe would do him better, with *Eureka,* by conquering God.

Byron had died at Missolonghi, bled to death by his personal physician as endless grey rain fell outside his tent and drowned his little army in the Peloponnesian mud—and nothing had come of Byron in the end, nothing but an example that inspired thousands of other young fools to die in similar pointless fashion throughout the world.

For Poe the war had come at a welcome moment. His literary career had come to a standstill, with nine thousand seven hundred fifty-one copies of the *Complete Tales* sitting in his lumber room; his mother-in-law had bestirred herself to suggest, in kind but firm fashion, that his literary and landscaping projects were running up too fantastic a debt; and his relations with Evania—on Poe's part at least—were at best tentative.

When Virginia seceded and Maryland seemed poised to follow, Poe

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headed south with Sextus, a pair of fine horses, equipage, a curved Wilkinson light cavalry sword, Hardee's *Tactics,* a brace of massive nine-shot LeMatt revolvers, and of course the twelve hundred in gold. He kissed Evania and his beloved Mrs. Forster farewell—within a few months he would return with an army and liberate Shepherd's Rest and the rest of Maryland. He, as well as Byron, could be martial when the cause of liberty required it. He rode away with a singing heart.

Before him, as he woke in his bed his first night in Richmond, he saw his vision, the benevolent madonna giving him her benediction. In going south he was being, he thought, faithful to Virginia; and he hoped to find the spirit, as well as the name, of his lost love embodied in the state to which he swore allegiance.

Jefferson Davis was pleased to give a colonel's commission to a veteran of the Wars of Greek Liberation, not to mention a fellow West Pointer—the West Point story, at least, being true, though Poe did not remind the President that, because the horrid Allan refused to support him, Poe had got himself expelled from the academy after six months.

There was no regiment available for the new colonel, so Poe began his military career on the staff of General Joseph E. Johnston, commanding in the Shenandoah Valley. He occupied himself by creating a cypher for army communications which, so far as he knew, had survived three years unbroken.

Johnston's army moved east on the railroad to unite with Beauregard's at First Manassas, and there Poe saw war for the first time. He had expected violence and death, and steeled himself against it—it gave him no trouble, but what shocked him was the *noise.* The continual roll of musketry, buzzing bullets, shouted orders, the blast of cannon and the shriek of shells—all was calculated to unstring the nerves of a man who couldn't abide even a loud orchestra. Fortunately, he was called upon mainly to rally broken troops—it had shocked him that Southern men could run like that—but in the end, after he'd got used to the racket, he had ridden, bullets singing over his head, in the final screaming, exhilarating charge that swept the Yankee army from the field, and he could picture himself riding that way forever, the fulfillment of the Byronic ideal, sunset glowing red on the sword in his hand as he galloped north to Maryland and the liberation of his home . . .

Maryland never managed to secede, somehow, and Poe's Byronic liberation of his home state had to be postponed. Via blockade runner, Poe exchanged passionate letters with his wife while remaining, in his heart, faithful to Virginia.

At the horrible, bungled battle of Seven Pines the next year, Major General Daniel Harvey Hill made a properly Byronic, if unsupported, attack against McClellan's left and lost half his men, as well as one of

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his brigadiers. Poe was promoted and given the shattered brigade. Joe Johnston, during the same battle, had been severely wounded, and the Army of Northern Virginia now had a new commander, one Robert E. Lee.

It did not take Poe long to discover that the ferocious, dyspeptic Harvey Hill was both an ignoramus and a lunatic. Before more than a few days had passed, neither spoke to the other: they communicated only in writing. Poe broke the Yanks' wigwag signal code, which didn't mean much at the time but was of help later, at Second Manassas.

But by then Poe was not with the army. Only a few days after taking command, Lee went on the offensive, and Poe, supported by exemplary reasoning and logic, refused point-blank Harvey Hill's order to take his brigade into Boatswain Swamp.

Now, after three years of war, almost all the American Byrons were dying or had been shot to pieces. Jeb Stuart, Jackson, Albert Sidney Johnston, Dick Garnett, Ewell, Hood, now Longstreet—all dead or maimed.

And Edgar A. Poe, leaning on his stick, a sick ache throbbing in his thigh, knew in his heart that Byron's death had been more merciful than anyone had known.

He had written the eulogy himself, never knowing it at the time: *But he grew old—/This knight so bold—/And o'er his heart a shadow/Fell as he found/No spot of ground/That looked like Eldorado.*

Byron's eulogy. Poe's, too. Stuart's, everyone's.

"Forty years dead," he said. "We have other poets now."

"Yourself, of course," said Major Moses, "and Tennyson."

"Walter Whitman," said Poe. The name left a savage, evil taste in his mouth.

"Obscene." Moses shivered. "Filth."

"I agree."

"You have denounced him yourself."

"Repeatedly."

Poe stared at the dark trees that had swallowed up his entire division. How many, he wondered, would come out of those woods nevermore? Sickness welled up inside him. In another minute he might weep. He turned and shouted for Sextus to bring him a chair.

The first edition of *Leaves of Grass* had happily escaped his notice. The second edition, with the preface by Emerson, had been sent to him for review at the *Southern Gentleman*. He had denounced it. Whitman and Emerson replied; Poe printed their replies and returned fire, and the fight went on for years, a war began that prefigured the more deadly one begun in 1861.

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A showdown, he had thought triumphantly. He had long distrusted the New England clique and feared their grip on the *North American Review*—the fact they regarded the pedestrian and bourgeois Longfellow as a genius was reason enough for distrust—but now the South had its own literary magazine; Poe was no longer dependent on the approval of New England literary society for employment and regard.

Whitman, he wrote, knew nothing of versification. Whitman thought prostitutes and steam engines and common laborers fit subject for verse. Whitman knew nothing of the higher truths, of the sublime. Whitman filled his verses with the commonplace, with references so mundane and contemporary that in a hundred years no one would know what he was talking about. Whitman did not even *look* like a literary man—in the ambrotype used as a frontispiece, Whitman was dressed only in his shirt, looking like a farmer just come in from the fields, not the elevated, rarefied, idealized creature—a poet—who spoke the language of the gods.

And Whitman was obscene. Grossly so. Clearly he was a degenerate of the worst description—Poe preferred not to imagine what Whitman did with those young men he wrote about in such evocative terms. Emerson might have used every rhetorical trick he knew to disguise the filth, or talk around it, but he never denied it—and this from someone who affected to worship the transcendental, meaning the refined and pure. It was then that Poe knew how bankrupt the North was, how desperate, as compared with his refined, elegant southland.

"Whitman is the perfect Yankee poet," Poe said. He drove his stick into the soil as if the earth hid Walter Whitman's heart. "No sublimity, no beauty, just stacks of prose disguised as poetry—sometimes not even prose, only lists. Lists of ordinary things. Produced so many stanzas an hour, like yards of cloth in a shoddyworks." He drove the stick again. "Like Yankee soldiers. Not inspired, just numerous."

Moses gave a laugh. "I must remember that, sir. For when General Longstreet returns. It will amuse him."

Poe stared at the woods, grinding his teeth. He hadn't meant to be witty; he was trying to make a point.

There was sudden musketry from the hardwoods, a succession of popping sounds turned hollow by multiple echoes. Then there was silence. Poe listened intently for a moment.

"Pickets," Moses said.

How many Yankees? Poe wondered. He turned back in the direction of his tent. Sextus was nowhere to be seen. "Bring a chair, you blasted orang-outang!" he shouted. He had no idea whether or not Sextus heard him.

More popping sounds came from the woods—individual shots this time. From a different part of the line, Poe thought.

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"Byrons can only die," he said. Moses looked at him in surprise. "We real poets, we're all too in love with death. Whitman writes about life, even the obscene parts of it, and that's why he will win. Why," he took a breath, trying to make himself clearer, "why the North will win."

Moses seemed to be struggling to understand this. "Sir," he said. "Sir, I don't understand."

More crackling from the woods. Poe's head moved left and right, trying to find where it was coming from. A savage exultation beat the long tattoo in his heart. He was right, he was right, he was right again. He stepped up to Moses, stared into his eyes at a few inches' range.

"Do you hear guns from the east, Major?" he demanded. "Do you hear anything at all from Lee's offensive?"

"Why." Major Moses stopped dead, licked his lips. There was pure bewilderment in his eyes. "Why are you doing this? Why are you fighting for the Cause?"

"I *hate* Whitman!" Poe shrieked. "I hate him, and I hate steam engines, I hate ironclad ships and repeating rifles and rifled artillery!"

"Your chair, Massa Poe," said Sextus.

A cacophony of sound was coming from the woods now, regular platoon volleys, one after another. The sound battered Poe's ears.

"I fight for the South because we are *right,* Major Moses!" Poe shouted. "I believe it—I have proved it rationally—we are *superior,* sir! The South fights for the right of one man to be superior to another, because he *is* superior, because he *knows* he is superior."

"Here's your chair, Massa Poe," said Sextus.

"Superior in mind, superior in cognitive faculty, superior in erudition! Superior in knowledge, in training, in sagacity! In appreciation of beauty, of form, of moral sense!" Poe pointed his stick at the woods. "Those Yankees—they are democracy, sir! Dragging even *poetry* into the muck! Walter Whitman addresses his verses to *women of the street—that* is democracy for you! Those Yankee soldiers, they are Whitmans with bayonets! I fight them because I must, because *someone* must fight for what is noble and eternal, even if only to die, like Byron, in some pointless —pointless—"

Pain seized his heart and he doubled over, coughing. He swung toward where Sextus stood with his camp chair, the cane still outstretched, and though he didn't mean to strike the African he did anyway, a whiplike crack on the upper arm. Sextus dropped the chair and stepped back, surprise on his face. Anger crackled in Poe, fury at the African's stupidity and inability to get out of the way.

"Take that, damn you, worthless nigger!" Poe spat. He spun and fell heavily into his chair.

The battle in the woods had progressed—now Poe heard only what

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Great Frederick called *bataillenfeuer,* battlefire, no longer volleys but simply a continuous din of musketry as the platoon sergeants lost tactical control of their men and the battle dissolved into hundreds of little skirmishes fought simultaneously. Poe heard no guns—no way to get artillery through those woods.

Moses was looking at Poe with wide, staring eyes. He reached into a pocket and mopped Poe's spittle from his face. Poe gave him an evil look.

"Where is Lee's offensive, sir?" he demanded. "Where is the sound of *his* fight?"

Moses seemed confused. "I should get back to General Anderson, sir," he said. "I—"

"Stay by me, major," Poe said. His voice was calm. An absolute lucidity had descended upon him; perhaps he was the only man within fifty miles who knew precisely what was happening here. "I have not yet shown you what I wish to show you."

He listened to the fight roll on. Sometimes it nearly died away, but then there would be another outburst, a furious racket. Lines of gunsmoke rose above the trees. It would be pointless for Poe to venture into the woods himself—he could not control an entire division if he could not see twenty feet beyond his own position.

A horseman galloped up. "General Gregg's compliments, sir. He and General Law are ready to advance."

Poe felt perfectly sunny. "My compliments to General Gregg. Tell him that Poe's Division is a little ahead of him. I would be obliged if he'd catch up."

The man rode away. People were leaking back out of the woods now: wounded men, some crawling; skulkers, stragglers; bandsmen carrying people on stretchers. Here and there were officers running, bearing messages, guards marching back with blue prisoners.

"Lots of Yankees, sir!" The first messenger, a staff lieutenant of maybe nineteen, was winded and staggering with the effort it had taken him to run here. "We've hit them in flank. They were in column of march, sir. Colonel Terry wishes you to know he's driving them, but he expects they'll stiffen."

"Good job, boy." Terry was the man who commanded the Ravens in Poe's absence. "Give Colonel Terry my thanks."

"Sir!" Another messenger. "General Clingman's compliments. We've driven them in and captured a battery of guns."

Guns, Poe thought. Useless in the woods. We can't get them away, and the Yankees'll have them back in another few minutes.

The sound of musketry staggered higher, doubled and tripled in fury. The messengers looked at each other, breathing hard, appalled at the

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noise. The Yanks, Poe concluded, had rallied and were starting to fight back.

"Tell Colonel Terry and General Clingman to press them as hard as possible. Try to hold them in the woods. When the Yanks press too hard, retire to the trenches."

"Yes, sir."

"Prisoners, sir." Another voice. "General Barton sends them as requested."

Stunned-looking Yanks in dew-drenched caped overcoats, all captured in the first rush. None of them looked over twenty. Poe rose from his chair and hobbled toward them. He snatched the cap from the first prisoner and swung toward Major Moses.

"Major Moses," he said in triumph, "do you know the motto of the Yankee Second Corps?"

Moses blinked at him. "No, sir."

" 'Clubs are Trumps!' " Poe told him. "Do you know why, sir?"

Moses shook his head.

"Because Hancock's Corps wears a trefoil badge on their forage caps, like a club on a playing card." He threw the prisoner's cap down before Moses' feet. "What do you see on *that* forage cap, sir?" he asked.

"A cross," said Moses.

"A *saltire,* sir!" Poe laughed.

He had to be thorough. The upper echelons were never easily convinced. Two years before, during the Seven Days, he had demonstrated, with complete and irrefutable logic, that it was suicidal for Harvey Hill's division to plunge forward into Boatswain Swamp in hopes of contacting Yankees on the other side. When ignorant madman Hill repeated his order, Poe had stood on his logic and refused—and been removed from command and placed under arrest. He had not been comforted when he had been proven right—his cherished new brigade, along with the rest of D.H. Hill's Division, had been shattered by three lines of Union infantry dug into a hill just behind the swamp, with artillery lined hub-to-hub on the crest—and when, red-faced with anger, he had challenged Hill to a duel, the lunatic had only laughed at him to his face.

"Specifically," Poe said pedantically, pointing at the Yankee forage cap, "a *white* saltire on a blue background! That means these men come from the Second Division of the Sixth Corps—*Wright's* Corps, major, not Hancock's! The same Sixth Corps that Lee was supposed to attack this morning, on the other end of the line! *I am facing at least two Yankee corps with one division, and Lee is marching into empty air! Grant has moved his army left again while we slept!"*

Moses' eyes widened. "My God," he said.

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"Take that cap to General Anderson with my compliments! Tell him I will need his support!"

Moses picked up the cap. "Yes, sir."

Poe lunged among the prisoners, snatching off caps, throwing them to his aides. "Take *that* to General Lee! And *that* to Ewell! And *that* to A.P. Hill! Say I must have their support! Say that *Wright* is here!"

As Moses and Poe's aides galloped away, the firing died down to almost nothing. One side or another had given way.

Poe returned to his seat and waited to see which side it had been.

It had been Poe's division that had given way in the woods, but not by much. Messengers panting back from his brigades reported that they'd pushed the Yanks as far as possible, then fallen back when they could push no more. The various units were trying to reestablish contact with one another in the woods and form a line. They knew the Yankee assault was coming.

Pull them back? Poe wondered. He'd made his case to his superiors —maybe he'd better get his men back into their trenches before the Yanks got organized and smashed them.

Action, he thought, and reaction. The two fundamental principles of the operating Universe, as he had demonstrated in *Eureka*. His attack had been an action; the Yankee reaction had yet to come.

He tapped gloved fingers on the arm of his chair while he made careful calculations. The Yankees had been struck in the right flank as they were marching south along narrow forest roads. Due to surprise and their tactical disadvantage, they had been driven in, then, as the rebel attack dissipated its force, turned and fought. This reaction, then, had been instinctive—they had not fought as units, which must have been shattered, but as uncoordinated masses of individuals. The heavy forest had broken up the rebel formation in much the same manner, contributing to their loss of momentum.

The Yankees would react, but in order to do so in any coordinated way they would have to reassemble their units, get them in line of battle, and push them forward through trees that would tend to act in such a way as to disperse their cohesion. Wright had three divisions; normally it would take a division about an hour, maybe more, to deploy to the right from column of march. The woods would delay any action. The bluecoats' own confusion would worsen things even more. Say two hours, then.

Any attack made before then would be uncoordinated, just local commanders pushing people forward to the point of contact. Poe's men could handle that. But in two hours a coordinated attack would come, and Poe's

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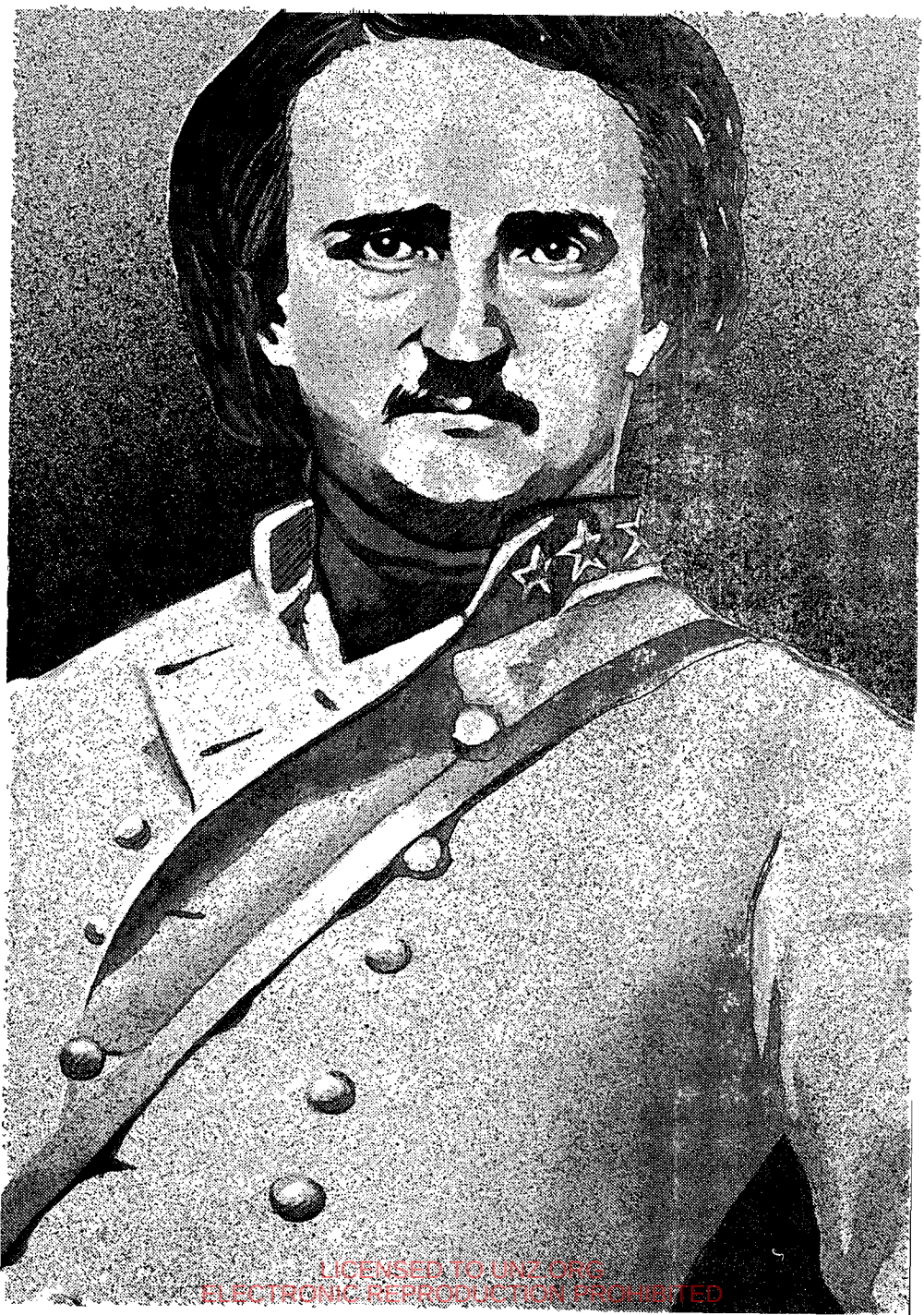

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Division would be swamped by odds of at least three to one, probably more.

Poe looked at his watch. He would keep his men in the woods another ninety minutes, then draw them back. Their presence in the woods might serve to make the Yanks cautious, when what Grant really wanted to do was drive straight forward with everything he had.

His thoughts were interrupted by a message from Evander Law on his left flank. He and Gregg had about completed their preparations to advance, the messenger reported, when they discovered that Hancock's men across the woods were leaving their trenches and preparing to attack *them*. Gregg and Law had therefore returned to their trenches to ready themselves for the attack.

Poe bit back on his temper. It *might* be true. He would have to see in person. He told one of his aides to remain here and direct any messages to the left of the line, then told Sextus to ready his buggy.

Sextus looked at him in a sullen, provoking way. He was cradling the arm Poe had struck with his cane. "You'll have to drive yourself, Massa," he said. "You broke my arm with that stick."

Annoyance warmed Poe's nerves. "Don't be ridiculous! I did not hit you with sufficient force. Any schoolboy—"

"I'm sorry, Massa. It's broke. I broke an arm before, I know what it's like."

Poe was tempted to hit Sextus again and break the arm for certain; but instead he lurched for his buggy, hopped inside, and took the reins. He didn't have the time to reason with the darky now. Sextus heaved himself up into the seat beside Poe, and Poe snapped the reins. His staff, on horseback, followed.

The battle broke on the left as he drove, a searing, ripping sound bounding up from the damp, dead ground. Poe seized the whip and labored his horse; the light buggy bounded over the turf, threatened to turn over, righted itself.

The first attack was over by the time Poe's buggy rolled behind Law's entrenchments, and the wall of sound had died down to the lively crackle of sharpshooters' rifles and the continual boom of smoothbore artillery. It took Poe a while to find Law—he was in the first line of works—and by the time Poe found him, the second Yankee attack was beginning, a constant hammering roar spreading across the field.

Law stood in the trench, gnawing his lip, his field glasses in his hand. There was a streak of powder residue across his forehead and great patches of sweat under the arms of his fine grey jacket. Law jumped up on the firing step, jostling his riflemen who were constantly popping up with newly-loaded muskets, and pointed. "Gibbon's men, sir! The Black Hats! Look!"

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Poe swung himself up behind the brigadier, peered out beneath the head log, saw, through rolling walls of gunsmoke and the tangle of abatis, lines of blue figures rolling toward him, heard the low moaning sound made by Northern men in attack, like a choir of advancing bears . . . The ones coming for him were wearing black felt hats instead of their usual forage caps, which marked them as the Iron Brigade of Gibbon's Division, the most hard-hitting unit of the hardest-hitting corps in the Yankee army. We've got two brigades here, Poe thought frantically, and we've got an entire corps coming at us.

A Yankee Minie whacked solidly into the head log above him. Poe jerked his head back and turned to Law. The smell of powder was sharp in his nostrils. The air filled with the whistling sound of cannon firing cannister at close range.

"You must hold, sir! No going back!"

Law grinned. "Do you think the Yankees'll *let* us go back?"

"Hold to the last! I will bring up support!"

Law only looked at him as if he were mad. And then the Yankees were there, their presence at first marked by a swarm of soldiers surging back from the firing step, almost knocking Poe from his feet as he was carried to the muddy back of the trench, the soldiers pointing their muskets upward, groping in their belts for bayonets . . .

Poe reached automatically for one of his LeMatt revolvers and then realized he'd left them in his headquarters tent—they were just too heavy to carry all the time. His only weapon was his stick. He stiffened and took a firmer grip on the ivory handle. His mind reeled at the suddenness of it all.

The sky darkened as bluecoats swarmed up on the head log, rifles trained on the packed Confederates. The Stars and Stripes, heavy with battle honors, rose above the parapet, waved by an energetic sergeant with a bushy red beard and a tattered black hat. Musketry crackled along the trench as men fired into one another's faces. "Look at 'em all!" Law screamed. "Look at 'em all!" He shoved a big Joslyn revolver toward the Yankees and pulled the trigger repeatedly. People were falling all over. Screams and roars of defiance and outrage echoed in Poe's ears.

He stood, the sound battering at his nerves. All he could do here, he thought bitterly, was get shot. He was amazed at his own perfect objectivity and calm.

And then the Union standard-bearer was alone, and greyback infantry were pointing their rifles at him. "Come to the side of the Lord!" Evander Law shouted; and the redbeard looked around him in some surprise, then shrugged, jumped into the ditch, and handed over the flag of the 24th Michigan.

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The soldiers declined to shoot him, Poe thought, as a compliment to his bravery. Never let it be said we are not gallant.

Poe jumped for the firing step, saw the blue lines in retreat. Dead men were sprawled over the abatis, their black hats tumbled on the ground. The ground was carpeted with wounded Yanks trying to find little defilades where they would be sheltered from the bullets that whimpered above their heads. They looked like blue maggots fallen from the torn belly of something dead, Poe thought, and then shuddered. Where was the poetry in this? Here even death was unhallowed.

Soldiers jostled Poe off the firing step and chased off the bluecoats with Minie balls. Confederate officers were using swords and knives to cut up the Yankee flag for souvenirs. Poe stepped up to Law.

"They'll be back," Law said, mumbling around a silver powder flask in his teeth. He was working the lever of his Joslyn revolver, tamping a bullet down on top of the black powder charge.

"I will bring men to your relief."

"Bring them soon, sir."

"I will find them somewhere."

Law rotated the cylinder and poured another measured round of fine black powder. "Soon, sir. I beg you."

Poe turned to one of his aides. "Find General Gregg on the left. Give him my compliments, tell him what I have told General Law. He must hold till relieved. After that, ride to General Anderson and persuade him to release the rest of Field's Division to come to the aid of their comrades."

Wounded men groaned in the trenches and on the firing step, cursing, trying to stop their bleeding. Yankee blood dripped down the clay trench wall. Cannon still thundered, flailing at the bluecoats. Southern sharpshooters banged away with Armstrong rifles equipped with telescopic sights almost as long as the gun, aiming at any officers. Poe found himself astounded that he could have an intelligible conversation in this raucous, unending hell.

He limped away down a communications trench, found Sextus in the rear, holding his buggy amid a group of waiting artillery limbers. Poe got into the buggy without a word and snapped the reins.

Behind him, as he rode, the thunder of war rose in volume as Hancock pitched in to another attack. This time the sound didn't die down.

On the way back to his tent Poe encountered a courier from Fitz Lee. Lee had moved his men forward dismounted, run into some startled bluecoats from Burnside's Ninth Corps, and after a short scrap had pulled back into their entrenchments.

Burnside. That meant three Yankee corps were facing two Southern divisions, one of them cavalry.

Burnside was supposed to be slow, and everyone knew he was not the

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most intelligent of Yankees—anyone who conducted a battle like Fredericksburg had to be criminally stupid. Poe could only hope he would be stupid today.

Back at his tent, he discovered Walter Taylor, one of Robert Lee's aides, a young, arrogant man Poe had never liked. Poe found himself growing angry just looking at him.

"Burnside, sir!" he snapped, pulling the buggy to a halt. "Burnside, Wright, *and* Hancock, and they're all on my front!"

Taylor knit his brows. "Are you certain about Burnside, sir?" he asked.

"Fitzhugh Lee confirms it! That's three-fourths of Grant's army!"

Taylor managed to absorb this with perfect composure. "General Lee would like to know if you have any indication of the location of Warren's Fifth Corps."

Poe's vitals burned with anger. "I don't!" he roared. "But I have no doubt they'll soon be heading this way!"

Poe lurched out of his buggy and headed for his tent and the LeMatt revolvers waiting in his trunk. Judging by the sound, Gregg and Law were putting up a furious fight behind him. There was more fighting going on, though much less intense, on his own front.

Poe flung open the green trunk, found the revolvers, buckled on the holsters. He hesitated for a moment when he saw the saber, then decided against it and dropped the trunk lid. Chances were he'd just trip on the thing. Lord knew the revolvers were heavy enough.

Taylor waited outside the tent, bent over to brush road dirt from his fine grey trousers. He straightened as Poe hobbled out. "I will inform General Lee you are engaged," he said.

Poe opened his mouth to scream at the imbecile, but took a breath instead, tried to calm his rage. With the high command, he thought, always patience. "My left needs help," Poe said. "Hancock's attacking two brigades with his entire corps. I'm facing Wright on my front with four brigades, and Fitz Lee's facing Burnside with two on the right."

"I will inform General Lee."

"Tell him we are in direst extremity. Tell him that we cannot hold onto Hanover Junction unless substantially reinforced. Tell him my exact words."

"I will, sir." Taylor nodded, saluted, mounted his horse, rode away. Poe stared after him and wondered if the message was going to get through at all, or if the legend of Poe's alarmism and hysteria was going to filter it—alter it—make it as nothing.

More fighting burst out to his front. Poe cupped his ears and swiveled his head, trying to discover direction. The war on his left seemed to have died away. Poe returned to his chair and sat heavily. His pistols were already weighing him down.

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Through messengers he discovered what had happened. On his third attack, Hancock had succeeded in getting a lodgement in the Confederate trenches between Gregg and Law. They had been ejected only by the hardest, by an attack at bayonet point. Evander Law had been killed in the fighting; his place had been taken by Colonel Bowles of the 4th Alabama. Bowles requested orders. Poe had no hope to give him.

"Tell Colonel Bowles he must hold until relieved."

There was still firing to his front. His brigadiers in the woods were being pressed, but the Yankees as yet had made no concerted assault. Poe told them to hold on for the present. It would be another forty-five minutes, he calculated, before the Yanks could launch a coordinated assault.

Comparative silence fell on the battlefield. Poe felt his nerves gnawing at him, the suspense spreading through him like poison. After forty-five minutes, he gave his brigades in the woods permission to fall back to their entrenchments.

As he saw clumps of men in scarecrow grey emerging from the woods, he knew he could not tell them what he feared, that Robert Lee was going to destroy their division. Again.

After the Seven Days battles, Lee chose to lose the paperwork of Poe's impending court-martial. Poe, his brigade lost, his duel unfought, was assigned to help construct the military defenses of Wilmington.

Later, Poe would be proven right about Harvey Hill. Lee eventually shuffled him west to Bragg's army, but Bragg couldn't get along with him either and soon Hill found himself unemployed.

Languishing on the Carolina coast while Lee's army thrashed one Yankee commander after another, Poe could take small comfort in Hill's peregrinations. He wrote long letters to any officials likely to get him meaningful employment, and short, petulant articles for Confederate newspapers: Why wasn't the South building submarine rams? Why did they not take advantage, like the North, of observation from balloons? Why not unite the forces of Bragg and Johnston, make a dash for the Ohio, and reclaim Kentucky?

There were also, in Wilmington, women. Widows, many of them, or wives whose men were at war. Their very existence unstrung his nerves, made him frantic; he wrote them tempestuous letters and demanded their love in terms alternately peremptory and desperate. Sometimes, possibly because it seemed to mean so much to him, they surrendered. None of them seemed to mind that he snuffed all the candles, drew all the drapes. He told them he was concerned for their reputation, but he wanted darkness for his own purposes.

He was remaining faithful to Virginia.

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Perhaps the letter-writing campaign did some good; perhaps it was just the constant attrition of experienced officers that mandated his reemployment. His hopes, at any rate, were justified. A brigade was free under George Pickett, and furthermore it was a lucky brigade, one that all three Confederate corps commanders had led at one time or another. Perhaps, Poe thought, that was an omen.

Poe was exultant. Lee was going north after whipping Hooker at Chancellorsville. Poe thought again of liberating Maryland, of riding on his thoroughbred charger to Shepherd's Rest, galloping across the garden, swimming his horse through the canals and lakes, aimed like an arrow at the heart of the place, the white arabesque castle that gazed in perfect isolate splendor over the fabulous creation of his soul, his own water paradise. Once he fought for it, Shepherd's Rest would be *his;* he could dispossess the restless spirits that had made him so uneasy the last few years.

Determination entered his soul. He would be the perfect soldier—he would never complain, he would moderate his temper, offer his advice with diffidence. He had a reputation to disprove. The army, to his relief, welcomed him with open arms. Huginn and Munnir appeared, delivered by grinning staff men who wore black feathers in their hats and chanted "nevermore." His immediate superior, the perfumed cavalier George Pickett, was not a genius; but unlike many such he knew it, and happily accepted counsel from wiser heads. Longstreet, Poe's corps commander, was absolutely solid, completely reliable, the most un-Byronic officer imaginable but one who excited Poe's admiration. Poe enjoyed the society of his fellow brigadiers, white-haired Lo Armistead and melancholy Dick Garnett. The Southern officer corps was young, bright, and very well educated—riding north they traded Latin epigrams, quotations from *Lady of the Lake* or *The Corsair,* and made new rhymes based on those of their own literary celebrity, whose works had been read to many in childhood. *Of the rapture that runs,* quoth Lo Armistead, *To the banging and the clanging of the guns, guns, guns. Of the guns, guns, guns, guns, guns, guns, guns—To the roaring and the soaring of the guns!*

It was perfect. During the long summer marches into the heart of the North, Poe daydreamed of battle, of the wise grey father Lee hurling his stalwarts against the Yankees, breaking them forever, routing them from Washington, Baltimore, Shepherd's Rest. Lee was inspired, and so was his army. Invincible.

Poe could feel History looking over his shoulder. The world was holding its breath. This could be the last fight of the war. If he could participate in this, he thought, all the frustrating months in North Carolina, all the battles missed, would be as nothing.

Pickett's Division, the army's rear guard, missed the first two days of

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the battle centered around the small crossroads town in Pennsylvania. Arriving that night, they made camp behind a sheltering ridge and were told that they would attack the next day in the assault that would shatter the Yankees for good and all. Pickett, who had been assigned elsewhere during Lee's last two victories, was delighted. At last he would have his opportunity for glory.

The next morning the officers of Pickett's Division and the other two divisions that would make the attack were taken forward over the sheltering ridge to see the enemy positions. The attack would go *there,* said Lee, pointing with a gloved hand. Aiming for those umbrella-shaped trees on the enemy-held ridge, beneath which there was said to be a cemetery.

Standing in the stirrups on his white-socked thoroughbred, craning at the enemy ridge, Poe felt a darkness touching his heart. Across a half-mile of open ground, he thought, in plain sight of the enemy, an enemy who has had two days in which to dig in . . .

Was Lee serious? he thought. Was Lee mad?

No. It was not to be thought of. Lee hadn't lost a major battle in his entire career, Sharpsburg, of course, being a draw. There was method in this, he thought, and he could discern it through ratiocination. Perhaps the Yankees were weary, perhaps they were ready to give way. In any case, he had resolved not to complain.

Pickett left the ridge whistling, riding toward the Yanks to scout out the ground. Poe and the other brigadiers followed.

Longstreet remained behind. Poe discovered later that he had seen the same things that Poe had seen, and wanted a last chance to change Lee's mind. When time came to order the advance, Longstreet could not give the order—he just nodded, and then turned his head away.

Later that day Poe brought his men forward, marching with drawn sword at the head of the Ravens, Huginn and Munnir cackling and fluffing their feathers on their perch just behind. He remembered with vivid intensity the wildflowers in the long grass, the hum of bees, chaff rising from the marching feet, the absolute, uncharacteristic silence of the soldiers, seeing for the first time what was expected of them.

And then came the guns. There were two hundred cannon in the Northern lines, or so the Yankee papers boasted afterward, and their target was in plain sight. In the last year Poe had forgotten what shellfire was like, the nerve-shattering shriek like the fabric of the Universe being torn apart, the way the shells seemed to hover in air forever, as if deliberately picking their targets, before plunging into the Confederate ranks to blossom yellow and black amid the sounds of buzzing steel and crying men.

The sound was staggering, the banging and the clanging of the guns,

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guns, guns, but fortunately Poe had nothing to do but keep his feet moving forward, one after the other. The officers had been ordered to stay dismounted, and all had obeyed but one: Dick Garnett, commanding the brigade on Poe's left, was too ill to walk all that way, and had received special permission to ride.

Garnett, Poe knew, would die. The only mounted man in a group of twelve thousand, he was doomed and knew it.

Somehow there was an air of beauty about Garnett's sacrifice, something fragile and lovely. Like something in a poem.

The cemetery, their target, was way off on the division's left, and Pickett ordered a left oblique, the entire line of five thousand swinging like a gate toward the target. Poe's heart thrilled at the abstract perfection of the maneuver, performed as precisely as on a drill field, but then he began to feel a slowly mounting horror—to his amazement he saw that his brigade was on the absolute right of the army, nothing beyond him, and he realized that the oblique exposed his flank entirely to the Union batteries planted on a little rocky hill on the Yankee left.

Plans floated through his mind. Take the endmost regiment and face it toward the Yankees? But that would take it out of the attack. Probably it was impossible anyway. But who could guard his flank?

In the meantime Pickett wanted everyone to hit at once, in a compact mass, and so he had the entire division dress its ranks. Five thousand men marked time in the long grass, each with his hand on the shoulder of the man next to him, a maneuver that normally took only a few seconds but that now seemed to take forever. The guns on the rocky hill were plowing their shot right along the length of the rebel line, each shell knocking down men like tenpins. Poe watched, his nerves wailing, as his men dropped by the score. The men couldn't finish dressing their ranks, Poe thought, because they were taking so many casualties they could never close the ranks fast enough, all from the roaring and the soaring of the guns, guns, guns. . . . He wanted to scream in protest. *Forward! Guide center!* But the evolution went on, men groping to their left and closing up as the shells knocked them down faster than they could close ranks.

Finally Pickett had enough and ordered the division onward. Poe nearly shrieked in relief. At least now the Yankees had a moving target.

But now the armies were closer, and the men on the Yankee ridge opened on Poe's flank with muskets. Poe felt his nerves cry at every volley. Men seemed to drop by the platoon. How many had already gone? Did he even have half the brigade left?

The target was directly ahead, the little stand of trees on the gentle ridge, and between them was a little white Pennsylvania farmhouse, picture-book pretty. Somewhere around the house Poe and his men

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seemed to lose their sense of direction—they were still heading for the cemetery, but somehow Garnett had got in front of them—Poe could see Garnett's lonely figure, erect and defiant on his horse, still riding, floating really, like a poem above the battle.

The cemetery was closer, though, and he could see men crouched behind a stone wall, men in black hats. The Iron Brigade of Hancock's Corps, their muskets leveled on the stone wall, waiting for Garnett to approach . . .

And then suddenly the battle went silent, absolutely silent, and Poe was sitting upright on the ground and wondering how he got there. Some of his aides were mouthing at him, but he snatched off his hat and waved it, peremptory, pointing at the cemetery, ordering everyone forward, and as he looked up he saw in that instant the Federal front blossom with smoke, and Dick Garnett pitch off his horse with perhaps a dozen bullets in him; and it struck Poe like a blow to the heart that there was no poetry in this, none whatever . . .

His men were plowing on, following Garnett's. Poe tried to stand, but a bolt of pain flashed through him, and all he could do was follow the silent combat from his seated position. A shell had burst just over his head, deafening him and shattering his right thigh with a piece of shrapnel that hadn't even broken his skin.

Another line of men rushed past Poe, Armistead's, bayonets leveled. Poe could see Armistead in the lead, his black hat raised on saber-tip as a guide for his men, his mouth open in a silent cheer, his white mane flying . . . and then the last of Pickett's Division was past, into smoke and dust that covered the ridge, charging for the enemy trees and the cemetery that claimed them, leaving Poe nothing to do but sit in the soft blossoming clover and watch the bees travel in silence from one flower to another . . .

The first sound he heard, even over the tear of battle, was a voice saying "nevermore." Huginn and Munnir were croaking from the clover behind him, their standard-bearer having been killed by the same shell that had dropped Poe.

The sounds of battle gradually worked their way back into his head. Some of his men came back, and a few of them picked him up and carried him rearward, carried him along with the ravens back to the shelter of the ridge that marked the Confederate line. Poe insisted on facing the Yanks the entire way, so that if he died his wounds would be in the front. A pointless gesture, but it took away some of the pain, the agony from the shattered bone only a foretaste of the soulsickness that was to come during the long, bouncing, agonizing ambulance ride to the South as the army deserted Pennsylvania and the North and the hope of victory that had died forever there with Armistead, shot on Cemetery Ridge while

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carrying his plumed hat aloft on the tip of his sword, his other hand placed triumphantly on the barrel of a Yankee gun.

"Law is dead, General Gregg is wounded," Poe reported. "Their men have given way entirely. Colonel Bowles reports he's lost half his men, half at least, and the remainder will not fight. They have also lost some guns, perhaps a dozen."

Robert Lee looked a hundred years dead. His intestinal complaint having struck him again, Lee was seated in the back of a closed ambulance parked by the Starker house. He wore only a dressing gown, and his white hair fell over his forehead. Pain had drawn claws down his face, gouging deep tracks in the flesh.

"I have recalled the army," Lee said. "Rodes's Division will soon be up." He gave a look to the man who had drawn his horse up beside the wagon. "Is that not correct, General Ewell?"

"I have told them to come quickly, general." Ewell was a bald man with pop eyes. He was strapped in the saddle, having lost a leg at Second Manassas—during a fight with those damned Black Hats, now that Poe thought about it; perhaps the Black Hats were becoming a *leitmotif* in all this shambles. Ewell's horse was enormous, a huge shambling creature, and the sight of it loping along with Ewell bobbing atop was considered by the soldiers to be a sight of pure high comedy.

Poe thought it pathetic. All that stands between Grant and Richmond, he thought, is a bunch of sick old men who cannot properly sit a horse. The thought made him angry.

"We must assemble," Lee said. His voice was faint. "We must assemble and strike those people."

Perhaps, Poe thought, Lee was a great man. Poe could not bring himself, any longer, to believe it. The others here had memories of Lee's greatness: Poe could only remember George Pickett, tears streaming down his face, screaming at Lee when the old man asked him to rally his command: *"General Lee, I have no division!"*

Poe looked from Ewell to Lee. "Gentlemen," he said, "I would suggest that Rodes be sent north to contain Hancock."

Lee nodded.

"The next division coming up needs to be sent to Hanover Junction. If we lose the railroad, we will have to fall back to Richmond or attack Grant where he stands."

Lee nodded again. "Let it be so." A spasm passed across his face. His hands clutched at his abdomen and he bent over.

We may lose the war, Poe thought, because our commander has lost control of his bowels. And a case of the sniffles killed Byron, because his physician was a cretin.

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The world will always destroy you, he thought. And the world will make you ridiculous while it does so.

General Lee's spasm passed. He looked up, his face hollow. Beads of sweat dotted his nose. "I will send an urgent message to General W.H.F. Lee," he said. "His cavalry division can reinforce that of General Fitzhugh Lee."

Bitter amusement passed through Poe at Lee's careful correctness. He would not call his son "Rooney," the way everyone else did; he referred to him formally, so there would be no hint of favoritism. Flattened by dysentery the man might be, and the Yankees might have stolen a day's march on him; but he would not drop his Southern courtesy.

Another spasm struck Lee. He bent over double. "Pardon me, gentlemen," he gasped. "I must retire for a moment."

His aides carefully drew the little rear doors of the ambulance to allow the commander-in-chief a little privacy. Ewell turned his head and spat.

Poe hobbled a few paces away and looked down at his own lines. Gregg and Law's brigades had given way an hour ago, on the fourth assault, but of the Yanks in the woods there had been no sign except for a few scouts peering at the Confederate trenches from the cover of the trees. Poe knew that the longer the Yankees took to prepare their attack, the harder it would be.

A four-wheel open carriage came up, drawn by a limping plow horse, probably the only horse the armies had spared the soberly dressed civilians who rode inside.

They were going to the funeral of the Starker girl. Battle or no, the funeral would go on. There was humor in this, somewhere: he wondered if the funeral was mocking the battle or the other way around.

He tipped his new hat to the ladies dismounting from the carriage and turned to study the woods with his field glasses.

Hancock had broken through to the north of the swampy stream, but hadn't moved much since then—victory had disorganized his formations as much as defeat had disorganized the losers. Hancock, when he moved, could either plunge straight ahead into the rear of Anderson's corps or pivot his whole command, like a barn door, to his left and into Poe's rear. In the latter case Poe would worry about him, but not till then—if Hancock chose to make that lumbering turn, a path which would take him through dense woods that would make the turn difficult to execute in any case, Poe would have plenty of warning from the remnants of Gregg and Law's wrecked brigades.

The immediate danger was to his front. What were Burnside and Wright waiting for? Perhaps they had got so badly confused by Poe's attack that they were taking forever to sort themselves out.

Perhaps they were just being thorough.

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Poe limped to where his camp chair waited and was surprised that the short walk had taken his breath away. The LeMatts were just too heavy. He unbuckled his holsters, sat, waited.

To the west, Rodes' Division was a long cloud of dust. To the south, Rooney Lee's cavalry division was another.

Another long hour went by. A train moved tiredly east on the Virginia Central. Rooney Lee's men arrived, went into position on the right. Amid the clatter of reserve artillery battalions galloping up were more people come for the funeral: old men, women, children. The young men were either in the army or hiding from conscription. Soon Poe heard the singing of hymns.

Then the Yankees were there, quite suddenly and without preamble, the trees full of blue and silver coming on to the old Presbyterian melody rising from the Starker house. The bluecoats made no more noise on the approach than Pickett's men had on the march to Cemetery Ridge. Poe blinked in amazement. Where had they all come from?

Then suddenly the world was battle, filled with the tearing noise of musketry from the trenches, the boom of Napoleon guns, the eerie banshee wail of the hexagonal-shaped shells from the Whitworth rifled artillery as they were fired over the heads of Poe's men into the enemy struggling through the abatis, then finally the scream and moan and animal sounds of men fighting hand-to-hand . . .

Poe watched through his field glasses, mouth dry, nerves leaping with every cannon shot. There was nothing he could do, no reserves he could lead into the fight like a Walter Scott cavalier on horseback, no orders he could give that his own people in the trenches wouldn't know to give on their own. He was useless.

He watched flags stagger forward and back, the bluecoats breaking into his trenches at several points, being flung again into the abatis. He felt a presence over his shoulder and turned to see Lee, hobbling forward in his dressing gown and slippers, an expression of helplessness on his face. Even army commanders were useless in these situations.

The fighting died down after Wright's first assault failed, and for the first time Poe could hear another fight off on his right, where the Lee cousins were holding off Burnside. The battle sounded sharp over there. Poe received reports from his commanders. Three of his colonels were wounded, one was dead; Clingman had been trampled by both sides during a squabble over a trench but rose from the mud full of fight.

The Yankees came on again, still with that grim do-or-die silence, and this time they gained a lodgement between the Ravens and Corse, and the Confederates tried to fling them out but failed. "Tell them they must try again," Poe told his messengers. He had to shout over the sound of Whitworths firing point-blank into the Yankee salient. He looked at the

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sad figure of Lee standing there, motionless in his carpet slippers, his soft brown eyes gazing over the battlefield. "Tell the men," Poe said, "the eyes of General Lee are upon them."

Maybe it was Lee's name that did it. Poe could no longer believe in great men but the men of this army believed at least in Lee. The second counterattack drove the shattered Yankees from the works.

The Yankees paused again, but there was no lack of sound. The Confederate artillery kept firing blind into the trees, hoping to smash as many of the reassembling formations as they could.

What did a man mean in all this? Poe wondered. Goethe and Schiller and Shelley and Byron thought a man was all, that inspiration was everything, that divine intuition should overthrow dull reason—but what was inspiration against a Whitworth shell? The Whitworth shell would blow to shreds any inspiration it came up against.

Poe looked at Lee again.

A messenger came from Fitz Lee to tell the commanding general that the cavalry, being hard-pressed, had been obliged by the enemy to retire. A fancy way, Poe assumed, for saying they were riding like hell for the rear. Now both Poe's flanks were gone.

Lee gave a series of quiet orders to his aides. Poe couldn't hear them. And then Lee bent over as another spasm took him, and his young men carried him away to his ambulance.

There was no more fighting for another hour. Eventually the rebel artillery fell silent as they ran short of ammunition. Reserve ammunition was brought up. Messages came to Poe: Hancock was moving, and Burnside was beginning a turning movement, rolling up onto Poe's right flank. Poe ordered his right flank bent back, Clingman's men moving into Hanover Junction itself, making a fort of every house. His division now held a U-shaped front.

What did a man mean in all this? Poe wondered again. Nothing. Byron and Shelley were ego-struck madmen. All a man could do in this was die, die along with everything that gave his life meaning. And it was high time he did.

Poe rose from the chair, strapped on his pistols, and began to walk the quarter-mile to his trenches. He'd give Walter Whitman a run for his money.

The fight exploded before Poe could quite walk half the distance. Wright's men poured out of the woods; Burnside, moving fast for once in his life, struck at Hanover Junction on the right; and unknown to anyone Hancock had hidden a few brigades in the swampy tributary of the North Anna, and these came screaming up out of the defile onto Poe's undermanned left flank.

The battle exploded. Poe began limping faster.

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The battle ended before Poe could reach it. His men gave way everywhere, the Yankees firing massed volleys into their backs, then going after them with bayonets. Poe wanted to scream in rage. The world would not let him make even a futile gesture.

The shattered greybacks carried him back almost bodily, back to the Starker house where civilians were solemnly loading a coffin into a wagon, and there Poe collapsed on the lovely green lawn while the batteries opened up, trying to slow down the advance of Wright's triumphant men. Limbers were coming up, ready to drag the guns away. Lee's ambulance was already gone.

Poe found himself looking at the coffin. A dead girl was a poem, he thought as his head rang with gunfire, but no one had asked the girl if she wanted to be a poem: she would probably have chosen to live and become prose, healthy bouncing American prose, like his Evania. That was why he couldn't love her, he thought sadly; he couldn't love prose. And the world was becoming prose, and he couldn't love that either.

The artillery began pulling out. Poe could hear Yankee cheers. Poe's staff had vanished, lost in the whirlwind of the retreat; but there was Sextus, standing by the buggy, looking at the advancing Yankee line with a strange, intent expression. Poe dragged himself upright and walked toward the buggy.

"Come along, Sextus," he said. "We must go."

Sextus gave him a look. There was wildness in it.

Poe scowled. This was no time for the African to take fright. Bullets fluttered overhead. "Take the reins, Sextus. I'm too tired. We must leave this *champ du Mars*."

At the sound of the French, Poe saw a strange comprehension in Sextus's eyes. Then Sextus was running, clutching his supposedly-injured arm, running down the gentle hill as fast as his legs could carry him, toward the advancing Northern army. Poe looked after him in amazement.

"Sextus!" he called. "You fool! That's the wrong way!" The fighting had obviously turned the darky's wits.

Sextus gave no indication he had heard. "The wrong way! We're running *away* from the Yankees, not *toward* them!" Poe limped after him. *"Madman!"* he shrieked. *"Baboon! Animal!"* His nerves turned to blazing fire, and he clawed for one of his LeMatt revolvers. Holding the heavy thing two-handed, Poe drew the hammer back, sighted carefully. A few Yankee bullets whistled over his head.

Sextus kept running. The dark masses of Union men were just beyond him. The pistol's front sight wavered in Poe's vision.

Stupid, Poe thought.

He cocked his arm back and threw the revolver spinning after Sextus.

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There was a bang as the LeMatt went off when it landed, but Poe didn't bother to look: he turned to the buggy and stepped into it; he whipped the mare and followed the guns and the funeral procession through a cornfield toward the Confederate rear. Behind him he heard Yankee cheers as they swarmed up onto the deserted Starker lawn.

The corn was just sprouting. The buggy bounded over furrows. The field was covered with wounded Confederates staggering out of the way of the retreating guns. There was a cloud of dust on the border of the field.

Oh, no, Poe thought.

Men moved out of the dust, became two divisions of A.P. Hill's corps, moving in perfect battle formation. Marching to the rescue, like something out of Walter Scott.

Poe halted, examined the advancing Confederates through his field glasses, and then lashed the mare again once he found the man he wanted to see.

Little Powell Hill was riding in another buggy—another officer too sick to ride—but he was wearing the red flannel he called his "battle shirt," and his heavy beard—a contrasting shade of red—was veritably bristling with eagerness for battle.

Poe passed through Hill's lines, turned his buggy in a wide circle, brought it on a parallel course to Hill. He and Hill exchanged salutes.

"I hope you've left some Yankees for us, general." Hill's voice was cheerful.

Poe looked at him. "Plenty of Yankees, sir," he said. "None of *my* men left, but plenty of Yankees."

Powell Hill grinned. "I'll reduce 'em for you."

"I hope you will."

"You should rally your men. I need your support."

Where were you when I needed your *support!* Poe wanted to say it, but he couldn't. Instead he just saluted, brought the buggy to a halt.

His broken men gathered around him. Hill's marched on, into the swelling battle.

The battle died down at sunset. The blows and counterblows weren't clear to Poe, but Hanover Junction, after having changed hands several times, ended up back with the Confederacy, and Grant's army was safely penned in the bend of the North Anna. The burning Starker house was a bright glow on the horizon, a pillar of fire. Someone's shellfire had set it alight.

Among all the other dead was Huginn, shot by a Yankee bullet. The raven lay wrapped in someone's handkerchief at the foot of his tall perch.

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Munnir moved from side-to-side on the perch, his head bobbing. Mourning the loss of his mate.

Poe stood under the perch in the light of a campfire, listening to reports from his subordinates. Torn and dying men were lying around him in neat rows. The living, some distance off, were cooking meat; Poe could smell salt pork in the air. From the reports he gathered that he had lost about sixty percent of his men, killed, wounded, missing. He had lost eighty percent of his officers the rank of captain or above. The figures were almost as bad as the attack at Gettysburg, last July.

A buggy moved carefully through the darkness, came to a halt. Walter Taylor helped Robert Lee out. Lee had apparently recovered somewhat; he was dressed carefully in a well-brushed uniform. Poe hobbled to him and saluted.

"General Lee."

Lee nodded. "This army owes you its thanks," he said. "You have saved Richmond."

"I have lost my division."

Lee was silent a moment. "That is hard," he said. "but you must tell your men how well they fought, how they have saved the capital. Perhaps it will make their sorrows easier to bear."

Poe nodded. "I will tell them." He looked at Lee. "What will I tell George Pickett? They were his men, not mine."

"You will tell him what you must."

Is this, Poe wondered, how Lee had got such a reputation for wisdom? Repeating these simple things with such utter sincerity?

Lee stepped forward, took Poe's arm. "Come. I would like to speak with you apart."

Poe allowed himself to be led off into the darkness. "Grant will move again," Lee said, "as soon as he gets his wounded to the rear and his cavalry comes back from the Yellow Tavern raid. There will be another battle, perhaps more than one. But sooner or later there will be a pause."

"Yes, sir."

"I would take advantage of that pause, General Poe. I would like to send a division to the Valley on this railroad you have saved us, to defeat the invaders there and strike at Washington. I would like to say, sir, that I am considering you for the command."

A independent Shenandoah Valley command, thought Poe. A chance for glory. The same command had been the making of Stonewall.

"My division is destroyed," Poe said. "I can't commit them to battle."

"Your division," gently, "is General Pickett's. When he recovers his health, he will return to command it. I refer to a new division, assembled with an eye to the Valley adventure."

"I see." Poe walked in silence for a moment, stopped suddenly as his

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boots thudded against a wooden surface. He looked at it and realized it was the Starker girl's coffin, lying alone in the rutted cornfield. Apparently it had been thrown out of the wagon during the retreat.

Glory, he thought.

The Cause was lost, he thought. He couldn't believe in it anymore. That afternoon he'd told Moses one should fight for something noble, even if its time has gone. Now he no longer believed it. None of this was worth it.

He should have died, he thought savagely. He should have died on that last spree in Baltimore. It would have spared him all this. And perhaps spared his men, too.

If he hadn't anticipated Grant's maneuver, all this savagery might have been avoided. And the war would be over all that much sooner. The one chance he had to change things, to become the great man, and all he'd done was prolong the nation's agony. Put more good men in their graves.

He thought of the lines of wounded and dying men, lying in the cornfield waiting for the morning, and he felt his heart crack. One fought for them, or nothing.

He straightened, took a breath. "I must decline the command, sir," he said. "My health and spirits are too poor."

Lee looked at him somberly. "You may wish to reconsider, general. It's been a hard day."

"I want to stay with my men, sir," Poe said.

Lee was silent for a long time. "I will speak to you again on this matter, General Poe," he said. He began walking back toward the raven standard. Poe followed.

"Your men shall be spared further fighting," Lee said. "Your men will be assigned to bury the dead."

For some reason this made Poe want to laugh. "Yes, sir," he said.

"I thank you for your part today."

Poe saluted. "Sir."

Walter Taylor snapped the reins, and Lee's buggy trotted away into the darkness.

He has left me in command of the dead, Poe thought. Sexton-general in charge of dead hopes, dead causes, dead ravens, dead verse, dead girls.

He looked at his officers, gathered under the standard for his instructions. Poe stepped to the perch and picked up Huginn's body.

"About fifty yards out there," he said, pointing, "there's a dead girl in a coffin. Find some men, find a wagon, and deliver her to the graveyard in New Market." He held out the dead raven. "Bury this poor bird with her," he said.

"Yes, sir."

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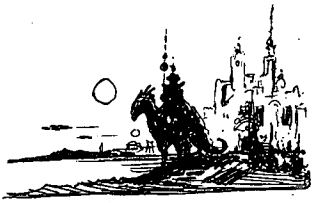
He pulled his black cloak around him. He could hear the moans and muttering of the wounded. They were his responsibility when alive; now they were his, too, when they were in the grave.

In a quiet voice, he gave his instructions.

Above him the raven mourned, and said nothing. ●



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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

October is the heart of the Fall con(vention) season. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at Box 3343, Fairfax VA 22038. Early evening's usually a good time to call cons (most are home phones; identify yourself and your reason for calling right off). When writing cons, enclose an SASE (and again, make it plain just what it is you're asking them about). Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard.

SEPTEMBER, 1989

27-29—**ConText.** For info, write: **376 Colonial Ave., Worthington OH 43085.** Or call: **(614) 888-5826** (10 am to 10 pm, not collect). Con will be held in: Columbus OH (if city omitted, same as in address), at the Mariott North. Guests will include: Chalker, E. Whitley, R. Green, the Coulsons.

OCTOBER, 1989

6-8—**RoVaCon, Box 117, Salem VA 24153. (703) 389-9400.** V. McIntyre, A. Wold, Hal Clement, R. Pini.

6-8—**Banfff International, Box 8521, Moscow ID 83843.** Banff, Alberta. Aldiss, DiFate, M. Glicksohn.

6-8—**ConChord, 1810 14th #102, Santa Monica CA 90404. (818) 719-9195.** Filking (SF folksinging) con.

6-8—**DragonCon, Box 47696, Atlanta GA 30362. (404) 921-7148.** Anne (Pern) McCaffrey. Gaming stress.

6-8—**BoucherCon, Box 59345, Philadelphia PA 19102.** The WorldCon for mystery fiction. Simon Brett.

13-15—**Ditto, 7501 Honey Ct., Dublin CA 94568.** Fanzine fan's con; see how fandom all got started.

13-15—**ArmadilloCon, Box 9612, Austin TX 78766. (512) 835-9304, 443-3491.** L. Shiner, B. Sterling.

13-15—**PineKone, Box 5368, Stn. F, Ottawa ON K2C 3J1. (613) 723-2485.** Bear, Merril.

13-15—**WeaponsCon, 5465 N. Morgan #106, Alexandria VA 22312. (703) 354-5358.** SF/fantasy weapons.

16-22—**Boreal, 2020 Jasmine Cr. 410, Gloucester ON K1J 8K5.** French-language academic meet & con.

20-22—**NecronomiCon, Box 2076, Riverview FL 33569.** G. A. Effinger, Tom Kidd, T. Zahn, L. Hoffman.

20-22—**NotJustAnotherCon, SCUM, RSO 104, U. Mass., Amherst MA 01003. (413) 545-1924.** Yolen

27-29—**World Fantasy Con, Box 31815, Seattle WA 98103.** Fantasy fan's WorldCon. Sellout expected.

27-29—**MileHiCon, Box 27074, Denver CO 80227. (303) 426-0806.** R. Bloch, Forrest J. Ackerman.

27-29—**DreamCon, 1321-N SE Everett Mall Way #103, Everett WA 98208. (206) 776-9764.** Larry Niven.

AUGUST, 1990

23-27—**ConFiction, % Box 1252, BGS, New York NY 10274.** Hague, Holland. WorldCon. $70 in 1989.

30-Sep. 3—**ConDiego, Box 15771, San Diego CA 92115.** North American SF Con. $65 to end of 1989.

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29-Sep. 2—**ChiCon V, Box A3120, Chicago, IL 60690.** WorldCon. H. Clement, R. Powers. $75 in '89.

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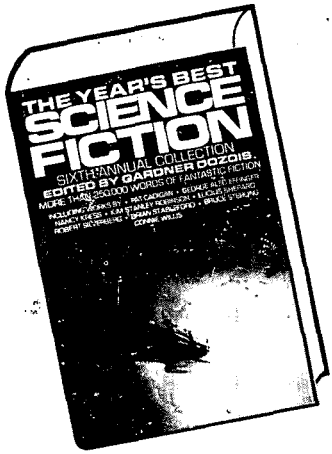

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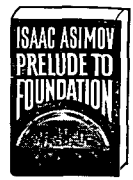

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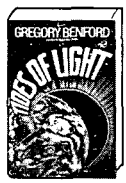

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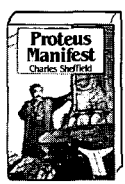

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